Overload

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There was too much data.

You know. That's it. End of story. Can I go now?

Too much data. That explains everything. It had to be forgotten. You can't keep it all.

We tried. We saved what we could, we compressed it down to almost nothing.

A cryptic reference. To a reference, to a reference.

Hidden in the corners, a shadow of something out of frame.

Part of a pattern, just a little out of place. An echo. Background hiss.

So it only comes back in dreams. Then you understand it all. Wake up, gone.

Most of it we lost. What I'm saying is, it was nobody's fault.

The problem was, we didn't know what was important. When it started coming in, we didn't even know it was data. I mean, not information.

The techniques we were using, you could find anything, if it was there. Maybe even things that weren't there. This was sophisticated equipment.

Our algorithms had to be new. Nobody had worked with those volumes before. At that speed. And it had to be real time. How could we test them? We couldn't model that data. Couldn't generate it. We didn't have the technology to generate that much. Try to understand that. Couldn't store it. We had to work with the real thing, raw.

That was the problem. One of the problems. The whole thing was problems.

Unless you see that...look, think of an antenna. Or, an ear. A sense organ. It doesn't matter how big. An ear, the size of a mountain. Or a continent. The whole planet. The solar system. Our antenna was that big. I mean, right there, that's an achievement. You build something like that, when you're designing it, you're making assumptions about the technology that will be developing as you go. In the years it takes to get the funding, to do the paperwork, to get

some agreement on what to do. You're extrapolating the trends. You're creating something from the future, see. You're actually creating the future. I mean, not me, I didn't design it. It was a while ago. But we built on what they did. We actually found something, didn't we? We made a discovery. We made the discovery.

It's there, listening. It can't stop listening. This is the ear. And then it thinks it hears something. It tries to focus. It strains, trying to make sense of it. But it's a universe of noise, rushing past, it's all the sound of all the galaxies since forever. And whatever was in between. Anything with a name and anything without one. It's everything.

Ever think about maps? They get bigger as you add more detail. And if you tried to add all the detail there is, the map would be as big as the thing you're mapping. Only maybe bigger, because as well as being the thing, it's a map. If you know what I mean. So what do you do? So you leave out the detail. And that's what makes it information. It has meaning because of what you leave out. Too much data and you're just as lost as you were without the map.

We have no recorder. Or we have a recorder, but it can only store a picosecond of all that noise. Or a few seconds of some ridiculously narrow band, tinny quacks and farts that make no sense. Recording it, figuring it out later, can't be done. Even if you could, you concentrate on any one thing, you miss everything else.

You're not getting this. You're used to thinking you can capture everything. Every moment can be relived. Take a photo. Maybe if all you're after is some cheapo VR experience, you can. Go to health zero, restart the level. But that's only when your data is small. We do that deliberately because we can't handle the whole universe.

But we have to understand this message. So we have to figure out the important part, in real time, and keep just that. All the stuff that rushes by, while we figure that out, all of that is gone. Just plain gone. At the speed of light. Never to be seen again.

It's not impossible, it's just very hard. That's what we do. This was a good team we put together. We got something,

didn't we? Maybe it would have been better if we hadn't. If we'd never built the thing in the first place. If we never tried to keep monitoring. Press the mute button.

It's easy in hindsight. You're standing there, saying why didn't we do better. Well, that's what it sounds like. Why didn't we figure it out earlier, why didn't we save more, why didn't we find the solution. You don't even know the solution was in there. There's nothing in what we captured that says, oh, and in just a moment we'll tell you the answer, but first a word from our sponsors.

No, it's not funny. I don't think it's funny. That's coming from you, not me.

Are you even interested in what happened? Cause if you're just looking for someone to blame, forget it. If you want my story, fine, but you know, if not, I can be somewhere else. Ok? Easy, I'm staying. I'm just saying.

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So the first time we decoded something, it was a picture. We could tell we were on the right track. You could see something. It was some kind of animal. There's a lot of theories. I mean, it looked like it had clothing on, but that doesn't mean it's intelligent life. No, it doesn't. I mean, people dress up their pets. It could have been a cute kitten picture. I mean, why not? Donald Duck wears a sailor suit, for some reason. Anthropomorphism, only not strictly anthro. Xenopomorphism. Or it could have been like a penguin. Well, they look like they're wearing tuxedos. Laughing boy here. He's wearing clothes. Insufficient information.

Yes, we can assume intelligent life. They sent us a message, didn't they? All I'm saying is the picture may not have been one of them. The ones who sent it. This argument went on for a long time. It's not over yet. If you want to buy in, read up.

That system worked for some stuff, but then there was other stuff that didn't fit. We had to find other decoding

systems. We came up with something that could have been text, you know, symbols, written language. But where's the Rosetta Stone? You need at least a little translated into something you understand, so you can crack the code. Then we found it. Pictures with captions. Simple captions. A first reader. At least, that's what it looked like. One word per picture. Elephant. House. Umbrella. And we had some teams trying to understand the pictures, to explain what they were, and other teams to fit that to the text, and finally we got somewhere. For one language. There were other languages. And we started to untangle them the same way. But by this time, we could see some of the big picture. You know all this, right. This is the bit you know.

We could see that they were like us. They didn't look too much like us, but they thought like us. They used similar media to communicate. They used language structured in a way we could at least start to figure out. Or imagine we had. And before anybody asks, no question whatever that they could have known what media we use, that they were trying to reach us in our own terms. Because the speed of light is finite is why. Unless you accept that, we are not talking about the same cosmos. Ok? That's not it. It's not about us. But, hey, major discovery. We're not unique. Although maybe we are alone.

I'm using the past tense, yes, we don't know they're gone, but the signal has taken approximately 70 million years to get here. If they're not gone then A, we're not understanding the message at all, and B, they're tough bastards and they've lasted longer than we can expect to, and they don't need our sympathy. And you guys don't have to be grilling me.

And the other thing we could tell was that this was not a telegram like, Greetings, Earthlings, we come in peace. It was a total dump. Did you ever say, so, what's up, and your date tells you, for the next five hours? No detail too small? No non-mutual acquaintance too obscure? No? Well, maybe that's just me.

Can we have some more water here? Thanks. And look, do we need the light so bright? You don't have to disorient me or anything, I'm cooperating. Unless it has to be bright for the one way mirror. Hello mirror people. How's the

weather in mirror land? I'll bet it's nice and dark in there. Care to join us in here? I'd settle for sunglasses. Thank you.

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Look, we filter. We forget. We have to do it. It's a feature, not a bug, is what I'm saying. We can't take it all in. You know, I'd go even further, I mean, this is known, it's an illness, a debilitating illness, maybe life threatening, if you cannot ignore just about everything. Autism. We haven't got the storage or the processing power to deal with it. You have to let the background go out of focus. Except you're saying the background should have been the foreground. That's convenient. But it just simply is not practical.

I'm trying to explain why basically you guys are coming from an unrealistic position. Even if we put the best construction on this, you are looking for something to fix. But nothing is broken.

Yes, I'm being defensive. Because you're attacking me. Oh, is it? Just a friendly conversation. So, hey look, is that the time, well, gotta be going. See you later. Steady, steady. I'm sitting back down. I'm sitting. You can let go. Take it easy, this is my good shirt. He doesn't talk much, does he? Can he talk? Hi, big guy. Where'd you get that haircut? I'd go right back there and ask for a refund. Just pick them up by the neck and they'll give your money right back.

So we're starting to get this material, but you know, it's all in the interpretation. I mean, it's like, some anthropologists ten thousand years from now find a game controller and they have a whole lot of learned discussions and finally they decide it was probably used in religious rituals. Or they find, like, fifty gazillion bazoomabytes of porn on some old buried internet server disks and they decide we were all very concerned about fertility. And I'm guessing in ten thousand years they are still jerking off, they are still remotely human, but they'll still get it wrong. I mean, it's hard to believe they'll be jerking off quite so much as we are, but you see what I'm saying.

And these guys, the ones who sent the message, if they are remotely human, we're talking 70 million light years remotely. So our interpretation is unlikely to be very accurate. We may be slightly off.

It's not like we were managing to capture a lot of material. In fact, you know, it's got to be less, percentage wise, than the dinosaur fossil record. Which is next to nothing. You think you know what a dinosaur looks like? T-Rex walked on his hind legs, you know that. For years they were modelling him on all fours. They don't know. It's a guess. It's a fantasy. You pick up a bone, you write papers about the ridges and what they say about the strength of the muscle attachments and blah blah. For all we know dinosaurs had fancy outfits and powdered wigs and office towers and rocket powered dirigibles. They were just more environmentally responsible, they made everything out of biodegradable plastics. Nothing left but the bones.

So some of us start to say,what do we actually know? What can we say for sure about this stuff? The medium is the message, sort of. But what we are seeing is quantity. The quantity is the message. And I don't know whose idea this was, but we all gradually started to feel this way about it. It was a feeling we couldn't shake.

They were sending everything. This was their whole, their entire culture, their history, their Shakespeare and their Plato and their Euclid and their George Burns and their bric a brac shops, and their complete Tupperware and hair product catalogs. Nothing was being left out.

Why would you do that? Package it, pack it all into a stream of data, and broadcast it to whoever might possibly be there to listen, however far in the future and however far away? They were just putting themselves out there, in their light cone.

Not a cheap thing to do. It would have taken time and energy. Large scale commitment. Their social organisation, we don't know, but there's so much variation, it's conceivable they had the same incredible chaos we do. But they did this. They somehow got it all together.

So we're thinking, common cause. And if they're anything like us, and we think they are, it's not they all woke up one day so happy they just wanted to tell the whole universe. It had to be a crisis. A major crisis that affected them all. That makes sense, doesn't it? If it was us, that's what it would have to be.

And this was their response to that crisis. Probably not their first response. Maybe they did a lot of other stuff too. But if you were going to do all that, if you had a Plan A, and a Plan B, they wouldn't be this. Your first line of defense isn't to leave a note for strangers. This was the final response.

We can't know. This is just...it's how we came to feel about it. Seeing those fragments of lives. It just seemed to us that the message was, we don't know you, you don't know us, but this is what we were. Maybe someone will remember us.

So. That's pretty much it. Cheer up, folks. Whatever it was, it happened a long time ago. It's all over. And for what it's worth, plan Z succeeded. A little. Here we are. We're talking about it. That's what they wanted. That's all they could hope for. So it's all good.

What do you mean, anything else. I just told you everything.

Sure, I deleted data. We had to delete data, we didn't have the storage, I told you that. Just stuff, stuff that made no sense, that we couldn't decode. That's all. Yes, I deleted some of my notes too. You're saying I can't delete my own notes. Did I? Well, maybe. I was tired, I may have made a mistake there and deleted somebody else's notes. Who's saying this, is this Ray? No reason, I'm not aware of that. I mean, I did not to my knowledge delete anything other than some …

A hacker? Are you kidding me? What is this? Oh, so you have made some far-reaching investigations and discovered that I am a 'hacker'. Well, newsflash, I am in this job because of a certain background in analysis and cryptology. I mean, guys, let's try not to insult each other's intelligence, ok?

Oh, I hacked in to other people's accounts and deleted their material. I hacked into the main repository. You have proof of this? Because the data is gone. So, yeah, I see, it had to be me, because I'm the 'hacker' around here. Along with just about everyone else on this project.

You can't know that. How can you know that? You were running keyloggers? Just on my machines? On everyone's machines. What is with you people? Do you give classes in paranoia? What poor sap had to sit there looking through people's keystrokes? Was it you, big guy? You should quit, I'm telling you. They don't respect you.

And, what, the DNA on Ray's keyboard matched mine? I suppose it's possible. You know, I may have been watching her work over her shoulder and maybe I said, here, let me show you, do you mind, and she like scooted her chair over and I used her keyboard. In fact, I think I remember doing that. One or two times.

Ok. Ok.

Hey, I wish you mirror people would come in here out of mirror land. I need to see everyone's face. Are you recording this? You need to turn that off. I'm serious. I am not going to say anything until I'm sure that it is not being recorded. I have to rely on your word, don't I? You have to rely on mine.

And hey, I don't want to call you laughing boy, I know that's not your name, I'm sorry I said that. Kevin? I'm Dave. Look, sorry Kevin, about that stuff back there. I was, you know, a little upset about the situation and I took it out on you.

All right, it wasn't just crap that I deleted. It was late, I was there alone, I was trying a new approach to decoding some of the data, and I got something. I don't want to say what it was. Because it will not help us. It will not help you, it will not help anybody. This is not good news, people.

See, you say you want to make up your own minds, but you won't. I tell you, it's out. The information will spread. And I don't want that to happen.

Yes, it was information about what happened to them.

No, it does not provide a solution to the crisis.

Yes, it is something that could happen to us.

This is very difficult. Without telling you what it is, I have to convince you that you don't want to know. I know, and that's bad enough. Because we can't do anything about it. And knowing makes it worse. You know, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like Oedipus.

You know that story, Kevin? Swollen foot. Big Foot. Could have been an ancestor of yours. Killed his father and married his mother, and the whole thing was like, an accident. Great story. Very Greek. You're not Greek, are you? With a name like Kevin. Not your real name, huh? Hey, nothing wrong with being Greek.

Look, it was a tragedy. An inevitable tragedy, is my point. And so is this. Why make it worse?

Why can't you just trust me? Knowing will not save you. Yes, it is what destroyed them. That's what it is. It's the same thing as will destroy us. It's not the sun going supernova. It's not going to do that. Not running out of energy. It's not the climate. That's bad, but this will get us first. It's already getting us.

All right.

What I saw was a mirror. Yes, mirror people, I saw myself. The stuff I was decoding, the patterns of thought I was seeing, the mathematics, the symbol manipulation, they were like the work I was doing myself, as I was decoding it. They were trying to deal with massive data overload. That was the crisis, that was what they were trying to solve. They knew they were failing. Once I got the hang of this mathematics they were using, I could read it all. I couldn't stop.

They were drowning in their own data. They were generating it faster than they could deal with it, store it, assimilate it. And as there got to be more and more of it, it devalued. It degraded. Nothing meant anything any more. They couldn't filter, they couldn't discriminate. They were forgetting who they were . Why they were. What their symbols stood for.

Informational entropy. They couldn't slow it down. It had already gone too far. It was self-perpetuating. Finance, defense, education, agriculture, communication, community interaction, love, sex, you turn it all over to information processing. An information economy is so attractive, everything in the one coin. Everything trades for everything else. Apples are oranges. The world at your fingertips. In a spreadsheet. But the old systems atrophy and you can't go back. And then it starts to fail.

What they discovered was a fundamental feature of information systems. That they eventually break down. They run out of storage, their retrieval systems clog up. They collapse under the weight of their own complexity. They grow until they saturate and then it's slow brain death.

I don't know what they called it. We call it Moore's Law. The information world is built on it. You rely on an exponential increase in the power of your computing platform. But Moore's Law fails. It only describes the first part of the curve. But there's a limit. The speed of light. And they were in part two, going downhill fast.

By the time you have a problem like this, you only know one way to solve it. Everything looks like a nail. You try to build more complex information systems. And all that does is bring on the end.

This is what death is for. A final forgetting. Someone, somewhere can be born and start again, knowing nothing. Like us.

All they could do was take what was still coherent, what still had shades of light and dark, and send it away. Send it out. That's all they could do.

That was the message.

So. Can I go now?

The signal appears to decode to a representation of waves. The very limited frequency range suggests the origin may have been compression waves in gas, perhaps generated near the surface of a planet in the third mass range. We believe this may have been a form of communication. The care with which this was preserved and broadcast indicates it may have been of special significance. There is evidence of call and response patterns. This may have formed part of a religious ritual.

At this point the signal faded. Further information is unavailable.