JEHEDNICK'S COMET

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DURING MY SENIOR year in high school, I had Mr. Francis Jehednick for World Geography first period every day. At first this was a blow: I'd been hoping for something good first period to wake me up—English Honors with "Bubbles" Brill, maybe, or better yet, Art, where you could spray-paint giant Hershey bars or cans of Orange Crush right onto the cement block walls. I had seen Mr. Jehednick in the halls before and I knew what he was. The word we used at the time was "nerd." He was tall and gawky, with acne-scarred skin and short hair carefully combed with water, like Mr. Science from the TV show of ten years earlier. He even had the Mr. Science stammer, and that year he stammered a lot. That was because it was 1974, the Year of the Great Comet, but nobody at Logan's Ferry High knew what was coming except Mr. Jehednick. It was up to him to bear the Word among us.

The first thing I noticed when I ambled across the hall from homeroom into World Geography was the maps. Every available inch of wall space was covered with maps in all colors: maps of the state, the nation, the hemisphere, the world; maps showing weather, mineral deposits, terrain; there was even an enormous map of space pasted to the ceiling. When Mr. Jehednick pulled the blinds and turned off the lights, the stars would glow.

I took the desk closest to the window, figuring that being rained and snowed on would keep me awake. But I needn't have worried about that. Mr. Jehednick's idea of teaching was to come loping into the room at the first bell, start talking before he'd even cleared the door, and not quit until the bell rang again. He'd spend the hour pacing around and around the room, tapping the maps with his extra-long retractable pointer, talking about the things he loved most: stars and galaxies, tornadoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, geysers, volcanoes, whirlpools, quicksand, avalanches, and the Theory of Continental Drift. He was fascinated by the slow power of a glacier to crush or of a jungle to smother, by deserts and canyons and islands—in short, by all the natural wonders of the universe. He talked about them all, too, his stammer melting away as he picked up speed.

It might not have been World Geography, exactly, but it was interesting. And it was easy. With the high school student's professional skill, we deduced at once the way to ace his exams: skirt the question and talk enthusiastically about how incredible hurricanes or icebergs were. You always got at least a B. It was enough for him, apparently, that we at least seemed to care about the same things he did. He wanted company.

His greatest passion, of course, was the Comet. It was all he talked about the first day of class. When the ball rang we shuffled into the hall, blinking and confused, as if we'd just come out of a movie. I didn't know whether Jehednick was off his beam or the greatest event since the coming of Christ was about to take place. Why hadn't we heard about it? Why wasn't everyone excited? I stopped my friend George in the hall and asked him if he knew the Comet was coming.

"What comet?" said George.

"We heard about it in World Geography."

George groaned. "I have that last period." Then he began complaining about how much homework the Slugger had assigned already in Civics, which *I* would have last period. By the end of my next class, I had forgotten all about the Comet.

But Mr. Jehednick was at it again the next day and every day after that. By the end of the week we were telling our families and friends that the biggest, brightest comet anyone had ever seen was hurtling through space at 100,000 miles per hour toward our sun right at this very moment and would appear in the sky by Christmas, so brilliant and huge you could see it with the naked eye.

"It will take up a full sixth of the sky," Mr. Jehednick told us, drawing the arc in the air with his pointer. "Think of it! Fifty times as bright as Halley's!"

It was called Kahoutek's Comet, after the Czech astronomer who had discovered it. The head would extend for some 50,000 miles, the tail billow out behind for tens of millions. The whole thing would weigh more than a trillion tons—which was fantastic (we repeated to our families and friends) when you considered that the tail mass of most comets would barely fill a teacup. The Comet had begun its long journey toward our sun two million years ago.

"And some scientists think it contains the same kind of hydrocarbons that set off the chain of life here on earth," said Mr. Jehednick, coming to a dead stop in front of Waterways of Africa. "Do you realize w-what that means?"

It meant that the most fantastic comet anyone had ever seen might also contain the very secret of life! What might we learn from such a thing!

"Comets were created at the same time as the sun and the planets," Mr. Jehednick went on, resuming his tour of the room. "But while everything else has been evolving, comets have remained just as they were at the beginning of time. Comets exist outside of time!" And he turned on us a gaze of triumphant astonishment, as if he expected us to rise from our seats and applaud.

The Comet would scorch through our skies, swing around the sun, and vanish again into the mystery of deep space by the end of February, not to return for fifty thousand years. And *we* (he said), were the privileged witnesses to this once-in-an-eon event. It made you wonder, he said, it made you think about what you were born for.

Now Mr. Jehednick was a homely man with the awkward kind of qualities which usually prove fatal to a high school teacher: the over-combed hair, the skin, the droopy socks and short-sleeved white shirts with the pocketful of pens, the dopey way he flapped his hands, and his uneasy attempts at humor. But such was his ardor that those who snickered at him quit after the first few weeks when it became clear that here was a man caught up in his greatest passion. This was for real. I, for one, had never seen an adult so enthralled. My father had been a coal miner and had died of the coal mines. Even my uncle, an obstetrician down in Grundy, looked at his work as work, and nothing more.

After the first few weeks, Mr. Jehednick reluctantly made room for some of his other favorite topics, but at least once a week he gave us a session on the nature and behavior of comets. The world outside, meanwhile, had at last begun to pay some attention to the great event. NASA was sending up Skylab III, Mariner 10, five rockets, two unmanned satellites, two balloons, one instrumental aircraft, and "a partridge in a pear tree," added Mr. Jehednick in one of his attempts to be funny. Books were being published about the Comet, everyone from astronomers to prophets of doom discussed it on TV talk shows, a shipping line organized a cruise to observe it, an airline planned a week-long trip to pursue it, and a host of new products appeared in the marketplace to honor it: Comet Pills, for instance, to ward off the effects of comet dust.

Mr. Jehednick was making his own preparations. He put up a calendar with big red numbers and every day one of us got to tear off a page. It was a satisfying feeling to rip off a sheet, crunch it up, lob it into the can—as if we personally had removed one more obstacle from the Comet's path. Every morning Mr. Jehednick adjusted the position of a tinfoil star on the sky map pasted to the ceiling. He had to climb onto a chair for this and the lights had to be turned off so the map would glow. It was a solemn moment.

By Thanksgiving he was coaching us on how to look at the Comet. "Blot out the sun with your thumb," he said, holding his thumb up to the fluorescent classroom lights. "The comet should be riding in the sky just off your right shoulder." And his eyes moved to where the comet would be. "Go ahead, try it."

So we all practiced blotting out the sun and glancing to the right.

So that the Word might be carried to those unfortunate students who were not in World Geography, Mr. Jehednick began submitting weekly Progress Reports to the school paper, which printed them under the headline of "Jehednick's Comet." The tag stuck, and for the first time at Logan's Ferry High, Mr. Jehednick had sort of a nickname.

I wondered how it made him feel. Nobody knew very much about him, about where he'd come from, what sort of life he'd had. There was no lore that had been passed down from previous senior classes.

"I think he comes from Deep Space," said George one day while we were getting stoned in the parking lot at lunch time.

But George's girlfriend Sandy said he'd told her he graduated from St. Andrew's, a small college in Indiana.

"So wha-wha-whatever brought him to West Nowhere?" said George, who planned to leave the state the day after graduation.

"Maybe he wanted to live on a mountain," said Sandy. "So he could look at the sky."

"They have mountains in Indiana," said George.

It was my guess that Mr. Jehednick had had a pretty bad time of it. He still had the look of an outcast. You could see he wasn't athletic and had no natural grace—he still bumped the chair halfway across the room every morning trying to climb onto it. He had no social grace either: outside of class he could barely speak, and ordinary conversation with him was painful. That's the kind of thing you pay heavily for in high school. I figured he had probably been an egghead all his life, read books and entered Science Fairs, that sort of thing. What I couldn't figure out was why he hadn't gone to M.I.T. to be a nuclear physicist or aerodynamics engineer. It couldn't be that he wasn't smart enough. There were scholarships if you were poor. What had made him settle for teaching high school geography in a mediocre little town? He would probably always live alone. Year after year he would watch as our younger brothers and sisters, and eventually our children, became his students; he would watch them fill up the seats in his classroom and empty them, fill them and empty them, while the maps on the walls yellowed and he remained the same. He would get old, retire, and die without ever having done anything remarkable.

But the Comet saved him from this—from what, at seventeen, I contemplated as a hideous betrayal of life. The Comet had whipped Mr. Jehednick's soul into passion. It was a kind of triumph for him, an exalted vindication of who he had been and what he had cared about all these years. He talked about Lubos Kahoutek as if he were an epic hero, dramatizing for us how the astronomer must have first noticed a hazy spot in the photographs he was taking of asteroids, how he must have checked and checked again, calculated repeatedly before finally firing off the wire to the Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams in Cambridge, Massachusetts: "Have discovered fantastic new comet!" Mr. Jehednick cried, quoting what he imagined the telegram had said.

Or there was the tale he told of Kaoru Ikeya, a poor Japanese garage mechanic with a homemade nineteen-dollar rig and a love for the stars as big as the sky itself. Night after night he sat outside in the piercing cold for hours on end—here Mr. Jehednick dramatized chills and cramped muscles

for us—patiently scanning the skies in hopes of spotting an uncharted comet. It was his dream. And then one night: it happened! Diligence paid off. Anyone could discover a comet and have it named for him. It didn't necessarily take money or fancy equipment or even sophisticated knowledge: it only took dedication. And anyone, said Mr. Jehednick, could freely choose to dedicate himself to something as great as a comet. It didn't take beauty or brains, it only took appreciation. And if you could appreciate greatness, then you participated in it a little. The Comet, he said, is shaking its dust all over us.

By the time Christmas arrived, we were fully prepared. We knew when, where, and how to look for the Comet. We were prepared to enlist friends, neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances—in fact under Mr. Jehednick's tutelage, we considered it our duty to do so. Some of us had even asked for binoculars for Christmas. The girls had taken up a collection to buy Mr. Jehednick a T-shirt printed with the prayer which a fifteenth-century Pope had added to the litany of the Church: "Lord save us from the Devil, the Turk, and the Comet." So that he wouldn't be embarrassed, we sent the T-shirt anonymously to his apartment.

I did not get binoculars for Christmas, I got shirts and a bathrobe. After dinner my uncle, the obstetrician from Grundy, walked me around the block and offered to help pay my college expenses if I could get a scholarship. I did not think I could get a scholarship, as my grades in the past had been unimpressive and the only A I could foresee this year would be in World Geography. Besides, George was talking about getting a band together after graduation and taking it on the road; he was even talking about moving out to L.A. and trying to get back-up work at the recording studios. A lot of young guys in rock bands were making it big these days, I told my uncle. He snorted and asked how many thousand guys bombed out for every guy who made it.

"You better be a genius," he said. "You better be such a fantastic guitar player—"

"Bass," I said.

"You better be so great you're the one in a million who makes it. Because if not—"

"It could happen," I said, wondering if I should tell him about Kaoru Ikeya.

My uncle laughed and started coughing into his handkerchief. "Wake up, boy. This is life, not TV. You want to throw it all away, that's your business. But for your mother's sake, I'll tell you one more time: take the money, go to college, study something like computers. Or get into oil. Look at the gas lines, the mess the energy business is in today. They'll be redesigning the whole system in the next few decades. That's where the future is."

"What about medicine?" I said because I suddenly hated him.

"Medicine's okay," he shrugged. "You can make a living if you don't mind being a slave to the profession."

"I want more than that."

"More than a good living? What more?"

"I don't know."

"I thought not."

"Something. I don't know. Something big."

"Something big." He coughed again and spat into the snow. "I'll tell you something, boy. Now this is the secret of life. Ready?"

Unwillingly, I nodded.

"The secret of life," he went on, "is that very little is big. Life is compromise, tedium, and monotony with a few very temporary interruptions. Now I'll tell you what youth is. Youth is a prolonged delusion. Luckily, it wears off. You think you've got an infinite range of choices, whereas in reality you've got very few. You can go this way or maybe that way, and if things turn out well it's because you were careful and had a little luck. You remember that and you just might squeeze some peace of mind out of life. If I had a kid of my own, I'd tell him the same thing."

I could hardly wait until he finished before I made my escape. It was like blasphemy to me then: my uncle would have yawned in the very face of the Comet itself. As soon as I got back to the house, I called George up and arranged a jam session on the spot.

Three days after Christmas was Perihelion Day, when the Comet came closest to the sun. This was the day Mr. Jehednick had officially marked for its debut. I met George and the other guys on top of Fireman's Hill. Between us we had one pair of binoculars, three flashlights, a Polaroid camera, and two cases of beer.

The sun hovered just above the murk on the horizon, streaking the river dull orange. As we watched, breathing out smoke and frost and sipping beer so cold the cans stuck to our lips, the murk seeped over the sun, distorting it. Below us, lights winked on in Logan's Ferry, in Millville up the river, and, down in the basin, in Grundy.

"Far out," said George, turning the binoculars around to look through the wrong end.

"There's Venus," I pointed. Mr. Jehednick had shown us where to look.

"I heard about some engineer who saw Venus up ahead and thought it was another train coming straight at him," George chuckled. "Backed his train clear up to the last station."

"Must have been drunk as a skunk," said one of the other guys.

"There's Jupiter," I pointed.

"I don't see no comet yet."

"He said look about ten degrees above the horizon," I said.

"What's a degree?"

"The moon's half a degree in diameter, so if you estimate twenty moon diameters above the setting sun. . . ."

We counted and estimated and held up our thumbs, but nowhere did we see anything that looked like a comet. Other stars emerged in the deepening violet sky, but these were familiar lights, mild and orderly.

We stayed a few hours, drinking the beer and stomping our feet for warmth, but no comet appeared. I wasn't worried about it: January was supposed to be the good month, after all. So after New Year's I went out again, alone this time. It wasn't so bad. I liked watching the distant points of light. Mr. Jehednick had told us that primitive people believed that the sky was really a canopy covering up Heaven—that stars were holes in the fabric through which the divine radiance shone, pinpricks, no bigger than they seemed.

That made me wonder what it was like to believe everything was what it appeared to be. What was it like, for instance, to live in a world with no telescope, no microscope? Mr. Jehednick had told us that there were as many atoms in a molecule of DNA as there were stars in most galaxies. "Within us is a little universe," he said. And within that, was there another even smaller one which we could not yet detect? Was there a universe larger than the one our telescopes could see? Where did it all stop? And what was behind *that?*

And suddenly, standing there in the cold on Fireman's Hill, I had a vision of what it meant to learn, to know things the way Mr. Jehednick did. Did the facts of history and physics and astronomy all lead to a common place, to a great mystery shining beneath the ordinary fabric of life? Was learning things the way into this mystery? It was the first time I had ever actually considered the life of the mind, the first time I had ever conceived of a university as something more than career-training, and it marked the beginning, I think, of my true education.

I kept my vigil each night, waiting in the cold like faithful Kaoru Ikeya, but either I was not yet worthy or something had gone wrong, for I never saw the flaming sword of heaven. The newscasters were calling it a dud and a flop. One scientist they interviewed said that the Comet hadn't given off as much dust as expected, that at Perihelion it had been lost in the sun's glare. If you had a powerful telescope, he said, you might see a faint luminous smear in the southwest quadrant of the sky. That would be Comet Kahoutek. Another scientist blamed air pollution and city lights. He said these would be so much worse by 1986 that no one in the Northern Hemisphere would be able to see Halley's Comet return. We would be lucky, he said, if we could see the stars at all.

Meanwhile, said the newscasters, back in the real world, six amateur astronomers had been mugged, and their telescopes stolen, on six different rooftops in New York City.

On the first day back, Mr. Jehednick did not come loping down the hall at the sound of the first bell, but was waiting by the window as the classroom filled up. He was wearing not the T-shirt we had sent but a red striped sweater with stupid wooden buttons, and for the first time I imagined him with a family who called him Frank and gave him the same kind of Christmas presents I got. He did look as if he hadn't had a decent night's sleep since Christmas.

When the bell rang, he turned around but didn't say anything for a moment. Then, as if making one of his jokes, he said, "It looks like w-we didn't get too much of a comet after all."

I had expected anger, maybe, or grief, but he only sounded embarrassed. The big red calendar and the tinfoil star were gone; otherwise everything looked the same.

"It did pass within 75 million miles of us—which is shouting distance, astronomically speaking . . . but you couldn't see it. I got a look through my telescope, but it w-wasn't w-what I expected . . ." His voice trailed off and he turned to peer out the window again, as if he might see it now.

Everyone was very quiet, although most of them had long since quit thinking or caring about the comet.

"To those of you who went out to look for it and felt disappointed, I w-w-w—" His voice got stuck on the *w* and his hand gave a convulsive little flap to set it free. "I *want* to tell you . . . I want to say I'm sorry." He said it as if he were personally responsible for the comet's failure to appear.

It struck me then that this was not something which happened very often in the real world. Not often would someone else bear personal responsibility for your disappointment. The universe was essentially indifferent, your losses and defeats essentially yours alone to contend with however you could. I thought I had already learned this lesson when my father had died, but apparently life kept slapping it on you until it sank in. And anyone could be used to this purpose: my uncle, for instance, who really only wanted esteem and respect, or Mr. Jehednick, who wanted approval and companionship.

These insights amazed me, so seldom had I experienced myself as a conscious being, and for a moment I was lost in admiration of them. But then I felt the embarrassment in the room. An adult had just apologized to a roomful of teenagers and then lost his tongue. He was standing there studying the Provinces of Canada, his hand stuffed in the pocket of his new sweater to keep it still. The other students were exchanging exaggerated looks of bewilderment. Was somebody supposed to get up and accept his apology? But who had been wronged?

"Mr. Jehednick," I said, and the hand jumped. "What happens to comets eventually? Do they die or what?"

He sent me a clear look of gratitude and then commenced a tour of the Nile Valley, which began at the pencil sharpener and continued all the way around the blackboard to the light switch.

"Oh yes, oh yes, comets do indeed die. Each journey extracts its toll of dust and gas that are scattered into space, and with each new trip the comet must grow a new tail. No comet lasts forever. It wears away, grows thinner and thinner until nothing is left but a gas molecule here and there and a trail of debris." He paused at Cairo and looked up, the old light blazing briefly in his eyes. "The bits and pieces are so small and brittle at this stage that you could crush them with one hand. Think of it! The mighty comet!" And he closed his fist upon the empty air to illustrate.

This, and the Nile Valley, set him to speculating aloud about the nature of erosion—one of those slow giants, he said, which over the long run can do more damage than an earthquake or a Hydrogen Bomb. And as he continued his tour of the maps, contemplating his world and talking apocalypse, I thought about life's capacity for disappointment and recovery. I saw that there was no real triumph, only what you were able to salvage and put together from the debris of hope. It wasn't so bad, it was just how things were and had always been. This was not the Age of the Comet, then, but an ordinary age, full of ordinary struggle, and Mr. Jehednick—like my uncle, like me—was an ordinary man.