

REALITY CHECK

by Tony Giovia

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It was a falling out among thieves, and the American public was eating it up. The Amalgamated Ambulance Chasers Association was suing the Customer First Automobile Salesperson Union over a lease deal they had made on a fleet of Lincoln Town Cars. The Ambulance Chasers had been outfoxed on the price, and their motto "Slicker Than You, Slicker Than Everybody" was openly ridiculed on the talk show circuit and local news programs.

The Ambulance Chasers were calling their suit "A Search for the Truth", and the car salesmen were calling it "A Search for a Buck".

Guess who was winning the battle of public opinion.

A man named John Plague had risen from obscurity to national prominence by offering to settle the dispute. He offered to bring both organizations together under an umbrella group he had formed called PLACEBO - Paid Liars and Complainers Endorsing Bold Opinions. When a suspicious fire ravaged PLACEBO headquarters, it made headlines for six days. Everybody was talking about it, and I guess that was the catalyst that dragged me into the middle of things.

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"What's the NSF doing in an arson case?" I asked. "It looks like a cop headache to me."

My boss Netto was Chief of Operations at the National Science Foundation. My name is Manny Levels, and I work in the Troubleshooter Section, which was one of Netto's responsibilities.

Netto banged his pipe clean. "The local police are handling the fire. You'll be working on a related matter without their co-operation." He leaned his stocky body back in his chair. His bald head gleamed like it had just been waxed.

"The scientists working on the Message From Mentalos Project want you to find something for them."

I didn't say anything. A few months ago Hubble had picked up signals from a newly discovered tenth planet named Mentalos. The signals were deciphered into what became known as "The Message From Mentalos" - 'The Answer you seek is a product of The Big Bang and E=MC2. Physical ideas obey physical laws'. I had been sent to

investigate and found that the planet, and the message, were real. The ruler of Mentalos, who called himself Bandwidth, may or may not have tried to kill me; I haven't figured it out yet.

Since then two more expeditions to Mentalos had failed to find the planet, even though Hubble could still see it.

"The participants in this melodrama - the lawyers and the car salespeople - are the best in the world at what they do. The Mentalos Project scientists want you to mix with them and come back with a practical definition of truth." His eyes bore into mine.

I admit I blinked first. "Huh?"

"They want to understand what truth is. They figure that attending a liar's convention is a good place to start." Netto doesn't mince words.

Most times I have a feel for what I need to do to complete an assignment. This time I was numb. Of course, I didn't have to take the job, but there is always a macho thing in the background which mostly negates that option.

"OK."

Netto grunted. "Plague has organized a rally this afternoon at Patriot's Park. All parties will be there."

I nodded.

As was his custom, Netto stood up and shook my hand.

* * *

Tristater is a friend of mine. He's also a Wheel at the NSF, big enough to rate a corner suite of six rooms and a secretary with legs that didn't quit. I told that secretary I wanted to see The Man.

"I'm looking at him," she replied with un-innocent eyes.

We'd met before.

"Let's go to Paris for dinner." I rubbed my tummy like I was hungry.

"Sure, if French customs will let me in. You see, I'm wearing a teddy under this dress, and I hear the French are very prudish about things like that."

"Not to worry. I'll pull a few strings for you."

Tristater leaned out the doorway of his office. "Leave that girl alone." He handed her a few folders. "She's only nineteen."

"I love this job," said his post-nineteen secretary.

"I'm here to help your career," I said to Tristater. "Got a minute?"

"C'mon."

I pointed my finger at the lady and followed Tristater into his office. Two doors led off to the adjoining five rooms of his suite, including a dining area which seated twenty and posh sleeping quarters for those late night "national emergencies" (he dated a Senator's daughter). Twelve big monitors were built into a wall, silently pouring information into the filtered air.

We sat in a couple of easy chairs and Tristater turned on a big screen TV, tuning it to Classic Sports Network. We were in luck, and caught Mike Tyson and Buster Douglas trading hamhocks.

"This fight is scary," I said.

"Yes. Just one of those shots would ruin my day." Tristater is tall and thin.

After a while I said "The Mentalos Project wants a job done. In between tequila shooters they decided they needed a definition of truth."

Tristater didn't react and it didn't surprise me. He knew everything that went on in the NSF. "Could be fun. Roshomon and such."

"Right now the Blind Men are one up on me. At least with an elephant you can feel the tail and have a physical reason to say the elephant is like a snake, or feel the leg and say the elephant is like a tree trunk. But how do you feel an idea? How do you hold it and say this is like truth?"

Tyson hit Douglas with two shots that would have dropped a horse. Douglas returned with two monster shots of his own.

Tristater said "Oooo, owww, yikes, yo mamma! You know, one thing about a fight like this, there's no talking your way out of it."

That brought me back to Earth. As you can see, Tristater is both smart and smooth. I stopped whining and started thinking. My style is to simplify the problem and go from there. I got it down to "Truth is an idea. What are ideas, anyway? What are they made of?"

I expected Tristater to say "energy", which was the message from Mentalos. Instead he said "Short answer. Ideas are made up of other ideas."

He was right. "Sure, ideas are defined in terms of other ideas. So at one level at least ideas are made up of other ideas." That felt good. It felt real, a place to start. "And ideas joined together form statements. These statements are true, false, or partly-true and partly-false."

"You're off and running," agreed Tristater. "Break up Statement A into its parts, and

break up Statement B into its parts. See which parts are the same, and you'll have a handle - a tail, a leg - to use for comparisons."

I nodded as I watched the screen. Douglas hit Tyson with a thunderous right and the champ went down.

* * *

Patriot's Park was teeming with cops and demonstrators. On my left were a horde of Amalgamated Ambulance Chasers, carrying professionally made signs disparaging the good name of the car sales industry. On my right were the Customer First Automobile Salesmen, shaking handmade signs and shouting obscenities at the lawyers. In the middle were PLACEBO representatives keeping the two sides apart.

The cops had gathered in small groups along the perimeter, drinking coffee and generally enjoying themselves. A band was set up but silent at the back of the speaker's podium. I counted nine Men in Black scattered here and there. Very strangely, there wasn't a TV camera in sight.

The lawyers and car salesmen settled down when John Plague ascended the stage. I had seen his picture but the NSF had no background file on him. A woman stood next to him, and from where I stood - near the back of the rally - she looked vaguely familiar. I worked my way through the crowd to get a better look at her and Plague.

"Thank you, thank you all for coming. My name is John Plague, and I am here to offer a solution to the conflict between the AAC and the CFCU."

This was greeted with an infinitesimal murmur.

"Your groups are embroiled in a childish issue. You both need to open your eyes and see the bigger picture. You both deal with people on a one to one basis. You need to bring your skills to play in a larger arena. That larger arena is accessible to you through my organization, PLACEBO."

The murmuring got a little louder. I had finally elbowed my way to the front of the crowd, and now I had an up close view of the stage. Plague was big, bearded and strong, and wore neatly tailored construction worker clothes. The woman wore a red blouse and blue jeans, her hair long and loose in the wind. I was sure I had met the woman before, but I couldn't place her.

Plague raised his arms. "I offer you a national platform. I offer you experienced politicians, men and women whose bread-and-butter is disguising private agendas with charitable homilies." Here Plague pointed at the crowd with both hands. "I offer you Paid Liars And Complainers Endorsing Bold Opinions - I offer you PLACEBO!"

The band struck up "Hooray for the Red, White and Blue", and a curtain behind them dropped to reveal large posters of two US Senators. The bandleader spun around excitedly and shouted into a mike "Look! There they are!" as a limosine deposited the two pictured Senators into the rear of the rally. Both men waved, then immediately

began working the crowd with handshakes and hugs. Each Senator wore a straw hat emblazoned with the word PLACEBO.

If I had a bomb in my pocket I would have thrown it. Disgusted, I turned my attention back to the speaker's podium and was surprised to see that Plague was gone. The woman was still there, and she was looking at me. She deliberately brought her hands to her forehead, hiding her hair. There was a question mark in her eyes.

I shook my head. She smiled, and then gave me a slow wink.

It came back in a rush. I had met her on Mentalos. She was Ms Terry, the right-hand-girl of Bandwidth, the ruler of Mentalos. Her hair and body were different, but it was her.

I jumped onto the stage in one motion but a security guard pushed me back. I tumbled awkwardly to the ground. When I got up Ms Terry was gone.

* * *

My next stop, of course, was PLACEBO headquarters. The fire had destroyed several offices, but the reception area had been spared. I was waiting there when a slip of a girl came and led me to the private office of John Plague. Apart from some smoke damage the room was all in one piece. It was also empty. I sat down and waited again.

Plague wasn't subtle. Construction tools hung on the walls - hammers, drills, saws, pliers - you get the picture. The pulled-down window shade was a big blueprint of the Capital building.

He entered loudly and swiftly. Instead of retreating behind his desk he stood over me and extended his hand.

"John Plague, at your service." He looked at the card that I had given his receptionist. "So what does the NSF want with me, sir?"

I stood up. I was sure Ms Terry has set me up for this, so I went right for it. "With John Plague, nothing. With Bandwidth, everything."

He smiled. He slowly removed the hair from the top of his head and his mind spilled out all over the ceiling - a 3-D cloud of geometric shapes and flashing, cycling lights. I'd seen it before on Mentalos, but it was still a sight to behold.

"So, this is an invasion?" I was half, or more than half, serious. I took a step back.

Bandwidth hadn't laughed in my presence on Mentalos, but he laughed now. It started as a deep rumble and ended with an ear-splitting burst of "HA HA HA HA HA". After that he said:

"You are already conquered."

Great.

He tilted his head back. "Why are you here, Manual Levels?"

I forced my voice into a lower octave. "You once told me you could read my mind. You tell me why I am here."

"To find a definition of truth," Bandwidth said matter-of-factly. "A definition that works".

In spite of myself, I laughed.

He went around his desk and sat down, sitting up stiffly. "When you believed ideas were made of nothing, had no substance, had a supernatural type of non-existent existence, then understanding truth was a slippery task indeed. But now you know that ideas have a physical existence, that they are construction materials, that they are physically connected to each other. That is the information you need to understand what truth is."

I had no trouble following him - he was talking about actually constructing a larger idea by joining smaller ideas together. You had to take out the tools and nail the pieces into a whole. It was similar to what Tristater and I had talked about earlier in the day.

Bandwidth's mind suddenly grew brighter, lighting up the room like an extra set of bulbs. Pliable whorled shapes appeared here and there, and small designs flowed into their open tops.

"You must understand the difference between "real" objects and idea objects. An object is real if it can only exist in one place at one time. An object is an idea if it can exist in many places at one time. Both ideas and real objects are composed of energy. But ideas are the relationships among real objects. And ideas are also the relationships among other ideas. Real objects can only refer to themselves, and to the specific ideas attached to their unique existence".

I could feel an overload coming on, so I tried to focus. "What about the definition of truth?"

"Truth is an idea about ideas. Real objects are neither true nor false - they exist without judgment."

"So truth is a construct of ideas."

"A logical construction in that the actual joining mechanism is physical inclusion - one idea is part of the physical structure of another larger idea. When the inclusion is incomplete there is partial truth, and partial falsehood. Truth is a solid, integrated construction. Falsehood is fragile because it has separate centers of power competing for dominance."

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. Instead, he got up and opened a drawer in his desk. He took out a plastic gallon water container and began shaking its contents onto the walls and floors. The "water" smelled like gasoline.

"What's up?" I asked cautiously.

"I built PLACEBO. Now I am moving it." Bandwidth tossed the container into a corner and struck a match. "Don't let this fool you. Ideas can't be destroyed."

* * *

Netto put my report down, and deliberately puffed on his pipe for several minutes. Then he raised his eyes to mine. He didn't ask me if I was crazy, which made him easy to like.

"What the hell is going on?"

I shrugged. "We've been conquered."

Netto grunted. "All my money is still in my pocket." His voice raised slightly. "Just what does this Bandwidth want?"

"I don't know."

"Look, the next time you see him, ask him." Netto banged his pipe clean and refilled it. "The Special Committee is going to love this. The Thing From Another World is organizing political rallies in downtown DC." He pictured it for a moment. "Oh, they're gonna love this."

Netto let out a small sigh. No doubt he figured Bandwidth would end up being his problem, along with all the other problems already on his plate. Lots of long hours lay ahead.

"Well, what the hell." He picked up my report again, and flipped to a page near the end. "The Mentalos Project should be happy with this. It's something they can grab and go with."

"I tried to keep it simple, just laying out the skeleton."

Netto grunted, his eyes on the report. He read: "Truth is a description of the logical relationships within a design of ideas. Different designs reflect different included ideas and different descriptions of reality."

"Yeah. I can see a few areas where this might lead, like defining contexts as selected groups of ideas, but the basics are there."

"Simple is best when you are starting out." Netto tossed the report on his desk. "Have you heard the latest? The media - TV and print - saw the handwriting on the wall. They put all their news division presidents into a room with the lawyers and car salesmen. Patched everything up. War's over."

"Oh yeah? There was nothing on the news."

"Never will be. The meeting never happened." Netto smiled, a rare occurrence.

"Ahhh so." I smiled back. "The 'Kill It Before It Multiplies' principle. They were worried about contagion."

"There's more. The room they all gathered in? A little place called the Oval Office."

That hung in the air for a while, and then Netto and I both grinned sad grins. There wasn't much else we could do.

THE END