



DRAWING BY PAULA PIKKULA AURSLAND

COMET STREAKS OVER ME

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Thursday, 3/21/96

This morning Astoria shakes, rattles and rolls. People fear an earthquake, perhaps connected to a volcano erupting a hundred miles out in the Pacific Ocean. We learn, however that we were in the path of a sonic boom caused by Naval jet fighter-bombers dropping like stones from several thousand feet to shoot missiles at a target. The Navy and other military units seem to be playing wargames off the Oregon and Washington coasts (simultaneous to China's imperial threats to Taiwan with a naval fleet rattling missiles on the other side of the Pacific). BOOM! IT'S AN AIRQUAKE, NOT AN EARTHQUAKE, The Daily Astorian bannerlined today's paper. Tsunami warnings are sent out and Clatsop County beaches evacuated. (The problem with escaping from a tsunami coming upriver to Astoria during an earthquake is that people running up the hill will probably be buried when it collapses.)

A friend tells me the shaking was due to Comet Hyakutake which is passing Earth and which I might see one of these nights near the Big Dipper if the clouds ever clear away long enough. "The comet's closer than they're telling us," my friend says: "The world ends Sunday," the day the comet is closest to earth.

The Great Comet of 1996 (as it is being called, following The Great Blizzard & The Great Flood) is about 9.3 million miles away from Earth ("a hair's breadth distance in the vastness of interplanetary space," an Oregonian reporter writes; but our tiny planet is a very small target in that vastness, scientists soothe) and traveling past earth at 25 miles a second. The comet is a surprise no one seems to have expected (everyone was rhapsodizing about Comet Hal-Bop due next year) and it is claimed to be the biggest and brightest in 20 years, following a number of duds like Kohotek (and Halley's was disappointing a decade ago after all the hype preceding its arrival). A scientist of the International Astronomical Union said the last human beings to see Comet Hyakutake (named after a Japanese man who first saw it in January) were Stone Age hunter/gatherers about 20,000 years ago.

I look for what comets are in Timothy Ferris' *Coming Of Age In The Milky Way*. Comets, he writes "are chunks of ice and dirt that fall in from the outer solar system, sprouting long, glowing 'tails' of vapor and dust blown off by the sun's heat and by solar wind." He aptly describes Comet Hyakutake when he says the appearance of new comets cannot be predicted. Comets "appear to originate in a cloud near the outer reaches of the solar system, about which little is understood," Ferris writes. "Their orbits, altered by encounters with the planets and by the kick of their own vapor jets, remain difficult to predict as well."

"Only in the vicinity of the sun do they blaze up. They catch fire like a sulfur match, and... a bluish flame leaps forth," wrote a 19th century astronomer about comets. Comets are a "striking testimony to the enormity of the solar system," Richard Grossinger writes in *The Night Sky*. "They come, seemingly from the depths of space and pass to the heart of the (solar) system in eccentric orbits slightly perturbed by the planets according to their sizes and proximity of their approach."

Tonight Comet Hyakutake will be just to the right of the star Arcturus. It will sail over the North Pole and disappear into the sun's glare in late April. It is due to swing around the sun beginning May 1 and its return trip past this planet to the vast void beyond Pluto will be visible in the southern hemisphere only.

Friday, 3/22

The sky clears tonight after rain. Near midnight I go outside my house (which is in a spruce grove halfway up one of Astoria's hills). Stars are clear in the spiky sky. I easily find the Big Dipper laying in treetops and trace an arc eastward through the shaggy cones of tall trees. Between the crowns of two trees I find a star a fist-width north of Arcturus. Underneath it a dimly bright fuzball which is Comet Hyakutake. Its first effect on me is hydraulic; I piss then my bowels take me quickly inside. Back outside, I think I am able to register it move though not actually see it. After a few minutes the comet seems not directly underneath the star (or the star might be following earth's spin). The comet and stars climb over my head. Sounds of car motors at the bottom of the hill on the city's downtown waterfront itch my

ears as I stare into the silence of space. I try to project myself 20,000 years into the past when this comet made its last swing near Earth. I wonder if any of my Paleolithic ancestors noticed the comet and what they might have thought of it.

Are we any more sophisticated? Storms, floods, lights in the sky. Ancient portents of cataclysmic events. Signs to strain a civilized cosmology.

People tried to protect themselves from Halley's comet in 1910 with alms and patent medicines, and Oklahoma sheriffs prevented the sacrifice of a virgin to placate the comet god by a sect called the Sacred Flowers. Comets have an unsavory reputation as heralds of disaster — from Latin, *dis-astra*, 'against the stars'. This is because they are unpredictable. Like Comet Hyakutake which seems to have appeared from nowhere.

"Do you believe in time travel?" Sam Devereaux asked me yesterday. "Yes I do," I said, thinking of the expanse of time since the comet's last appearance. "I've traveled a few seconds through time since you asked the question."

Saturday, 3/23

I had hoped to show Comet Hyakutake to Connie Kimble's sons tonight (Johnnie Blue, Brendan & Issac) but they are asleep by the time the sky clears long enough for it to be visible. Open tears in the swiftly moving ocean of clouds that flood over Astoria on a wet cold west wind reveal the comet as a faded lint ball to my naked eye. It is much farther north than last night, almost about to hitch a ride on the last star of the Big Dipper's handle. I unsuccessfully try to wake up the oldest boy, Johnnie Blue (who just turned 8), asleep on the couch until his mother comes home from a night out with a school chum and her teenaged daughter from New Mexico. For several minutes I stare up at the comet which is obscured continuously by cloud riffs (and I lose sight of it for a few moments when a neighbor turns on bright lights in a back room of an old house) until a solid blanket dissolves comet and stars and drains drizzle from its plump stomach. A large ship clanks upriver past Astoria's waterfront the same instant Comet Hyakutake disappears; comets of sky and ocean.

A comet viewing party planned for tonight atop the Astoria Column on Coxcomb Hill is canceled due to the clouds. I am lucky to catch the glimpses of it that I have.

Sunday, 3/24

Best night yet for comet watching. Comet Hyakutake is closest to Earth tonight and tomorrow night, and so far has not collided with us. I first see it in a clear sky from the front porch of Peter Unander's house, above the roofs of old houses across the street. Tonight I can see its tail. I point the comet out to almost

everybody at a party at Peter's house. He shows photographs of his most recent trip to France to see his parents, his mother in the south, his father Egil (Prince of Astoria) in Paris. Later he plays an old upright piano accompanied by drums and a slide trombone. His clothes are distinctly French. I tell him he resembles cabaret musicians of 1930s Algiers. On the porch we all look east at the northbound comet, huddled close, our unconscious need for mutual warmth and protection when confronted with cold dark eternal space. The comet is outside our reach; it mocks our puny superiority over a peewee planet. It ridicules our misspent mediocrity. I am as common as dust in this brief interval of history I am sentient, despite an insistent rattle in my brain that claims I am unique. My greatest contribution to Earth is my waste products. My death ends all life as far I am concerned. DOA to the worms. But it's really like a blues song might be: *Old Comet Don't Care!*

At least I am able to point out Comet Hyakutake to Connie Kimble's three sons tonight. We sit at the top of Peter's steep porch, a cluster of kneeling and sitting *homo sapiens sapiens*, at least half of us inheritors of the next millennium. I wonder aloud how many millions of human terrestrials are looking up at the comet at this same moment we huddle together on a Pacific Northwest porch. The last time it screeched past Earth there were probably no more than 50 million human beings on the planet (a guess impossible to prove). This visit we number 5 billion. One of the billions said from across the street a few things about the comet I was unable to hear clearly; I remarked to my cluster group on the porch that we are all linked by the communications media and have read the same newspaper articles or listened to radio/TV explicators factoiding the comet's brief passage through our sky. (There is also an Internet link with information pages and finder charts.)

I make postcards of the comet when I walk home. I stop several places and look at it above an old house, ships in the river, at tops of tall spruce trees. *Comet Flies Over Old Astoria House. Comet Sails Over Ships Anchored in the Columbia River At Astoria, Oregon. Comet Crosses Over Pacific Northwest Forests.*

A man taking his kids to the beach for a clearer view of the comet allows me a few seconds with a pair of binoculars. Magnified, Comet Hyakutake resembles a glowing sorcerer's ball, blue/white at its core.

At midnight I sit on my front porch and stare up above tall spruce trees that make an oval stage of the sky. Just above my head is a comet that last raced past Earth when my aboriginal ancestors were flaking flint. The comet aims straight north, cutting through the polar orbit of the Big Dipper. I see its tail stretch over my roof. I am cosmic (enthralled and humble) that the comet flies over my house. I feel spectral staring up into the star bright sky to see a flaming fuzball with a starched tail stuck against the celestial backdrop like a bad paste job. I attempt to grok the span of 20 millennia fore and aft; the last time and next Comet Hyakutake laps planet Earth.

I think it is remarkable that a comet is in the sky outside my house and that I am able to see it from my front porch. Much more of a neighbor than the stars whose addresses are light years away. Of course the planets are next door and the moon is like a shed in the backyard.

My favorite postcard: *Comet Streaks Over Me!* (A Sci Fi pulp drawing: Tesla snaps and crackles of electricity between the comet and my exposed pulsing brain.)

The comedian George Carlin hopes The Big Comet that crashed to earth and probably wiped out the Age of Reptiles (and created us) would return soon and set the world back to where it was. My desire is more modest: I would like to ride the comet through eternity; hail it like a city bus and never get off.

Monday, 3/25

I remain at home today because I spent my babysitting money on red wine and groceries yesterday. I was graciously allowed to feed on lamb and delicious shrimp and pesto burritos made by Connie Kimble at Peter Unanander's party last night. "Can I crash your party for awhile," I asked Peter after walking to his house on Astoria's still wicked eastside. I drained a bottle of *Beaujolais* and walked home. My only contribution to the party was discovering the comet for the rest of the attendees, espec-



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