

DEATH BY GPS

By Martha Reed

“Idjits. Can’t they read? Every sign out here tells them they can’t carry enough water to survive, but they try it anyway.” Inyo County Sheriff’s Deputy Tucker Poe toed the dead hiker with his boot. The loose bones inside the desiccated corpse rattled like a gourd. “Hell, you lose a gallon of water a day sitting in the shade.”

The convection oven that was Death Valley’s floor had started sucking the moisture from my skin the second I cracked the Ford Explorer’s door. I twitched as a line of hot sweat popped beneath my Kevlar vest. By day’s end, I’d be coated in layers of dried salt and sunscreen like a layered birthday cake.

“Canfield, you’re a smart fella. Tell me this.” Tucker dusted his hands. “How often do visitors die in Death Valley?”

I wasn’t falling for that one. “Only once, like anywhere else.”

Each year we see about 1.3 million tourists travelling through Death Valley National Park and each year we registered about ten heatstroke-related deaths. The fatalities, though, usually occurred in the Stovepipe Wells dunes, closer to the general tourist area and not in the middle of the Bad Water salt plain like this one had. In any case, our Unknown Hiker was candidate number six for the year and it was still early, only July. This corpse entertained a host of other curiosities. “Where’s his canteen? Where is his hat?”

“You’re the big mantracker,” Tucker said, pointedly. “You tell me.”

Tucker thinks he's a better tracker than I am, saying that I've been known to quit tracking too soon. He's still jealous that I beat him out of the Bonham scholarship competition when I won the chance to go back East for school. I even took classes at FBI Headquarters in Quantico before I recognized that the National Park Service was the direction I needed to go. I can't abide being confined inside an office tower; hearing people I can't see in other cubicles makes me flinch. In the end we both know we needed to live face-to-face with whatever wilderness remains in this great country. It's in our DNA. Our great-grandfather Clem Bonham successfully mantracked Geronimo and those Apaches were nothing to fuck with. In Death Valley, we're up against Mother Nature and the bitch is savage.

I studied the three sets of tracks leading to the dead hiker. Two sets presented crisp LawPro TerraMax boot prints. The third blurry, toe-dragging prints looked purely commercial. They matched the boots on the corpse's feet. I also noted a weaving line of U-shaped prints belonging to a random feral burro. God knows how those burros survived living out on the salt plain, but they did. Their U-shaped tracks crisscrossed the dry hills everywhere. "He must have tossed his gear. Dehydration causes hallucinations, confused thinking."

"In any case, you get to call this in," Tucker said. "No crime here that I can see other than terminal stupidity. Darwinism at its finest. I relinquish jurisdiction." He headed for my truck. "Let's get a crash bag, pack him up. I'll help you that far."

Death Valley National Park is three million acres big. Law enforcement is by multi-agency agreement. As an NPS Ranger, I'm a fully commissioned police officer, but I can share my duties with Tucker and Inyo County, if needed. I can also ping the California Highway Patrol. I don't really like working with CHPs, those Staties are odd, but CHPs has two very useful Seahawk helicopters on permanent standby which come in handy for any Search and

Rescue missions which we do occasionally see. It came as no surprise to me when Tucker relinquished Inyo County jurisdiction even though he is their duly appointed SAR manager.

Tucker is one lazy sonofabitch. He hates doing paperwork.

I popped the hatchback using the keychain remote. Tucker automatically reached inside before recoiling suddenly.

“Jesus, Canfield! What’s that thing?”

I was quite proud of my new gear. “It’s a MultiQuad AutoPilot EasyLift with a 200mW 5.8 GHz open-source Hi-Def SteadyCam video downlink.”

He gave me his trademark glare. “Give that to me again in English.”

“It’s a drone.”

“You bought a drone.” He tentatively spun the black rotor blades with his fingertips.

“Why am I not surprised? A drone would be a perfect shitstorm for a techie nerd like you.”

“It’s the next step in SAR.” Handing him a pair of nitrile gloves, I unfolded a body bag.

“A MAE like this can go anywhere. Nothing is too remote to scan. It has an extended flight time of over two hours and it feeds data and images through a Hi-Def digital camera mounted in the cockpit. I can pilot it using these virtual reality goggles or observe the flight through an e-link on my laptop.” I shrugged. “We don’t need to conduct foot searches or use horses anymore. That’s obsolete.”

Tucker looked troubled. “I can see that this gadget is interesting, Emmett, but Mother Nature doesn’t give a shit about technology. You need to stay alert and keep things real. Reliance on technology will get you killed.” Snicking his tongue against his teeth, he pointed to the jagged horizon. “There are things happening in this Valley that can’t be explained.”

“Oh, yes? Like what? Aliens? You want me to worry about Area 51 now?”

“Jackass. You know what I mean.”

Actually, I did. About a half a dozen tourists, mostly Europeans go missing in Death Valley each year. We’ve never found their bodies. We still don’t know where they are.

Hefting the hiker’s body on three, we lowered it into the body bag. The corpse was surprisingly light, weighing less than 35 kilos. The super-heated thermal wind, the blanching desert sun and the exposure to the limitless natron and Epsom salts in the dried lake bed had effectively mummified it in the course of one day. Shifting the corpse released a powdery scent that wasn’t unpleasant, a smell like stale bacon. I zipped the body bag shut and with our second heave we slid it easily into the back of the Ford.

“Drone technology is our future. The best part of a MAE is that it automatically records GPS coordinates off NASA’s global satellite grid. Everything can be ground-tracked now.”

“You’re not going to drop this, are you?” Tucker discarded his gloves into an evidence box. “You really know how to fly this thing?”

“I do.”

“Then call this in and fire it up.” Grinning crookedly, he cocked his thumb at the body bag. “This guy’s not going anywhere fast.”

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Tucker was already wearing my virtual reality goggles when I returned to the back of the Ford.

“I figured out the laptop link.” He pointed to a glowing neon green grid on the screen. “I’d avoid flying this thing over the China Lake Naval Weapons Center if I was you. I don’t know what you paid for it, but that’s restricted air space. They’ll blast you down.”

“Noted.” I carried the MAE approximately five meters away and returned to share the minimal shade. Manipulating the dip-stick control using my forefingers and thumbs was simple enough. The rotors began producing their waspy hum and the MAE started to rise. Lift off wasn’t as smooth as I’d hoped it would be, but the MAE was up. Increasing the elevation to 20 meters, I sent it buzzing along Purgatory Ridge.

“This rocks.” Even encased in the goggles, Tucker looked enthralled. “I wish Inyo’d had one of these back in the ‘Seventies. We could’ve spied on the Manson Family at Barker Ranch. Seen if they ever really built that Helter Skelter bunker they always claimed they did or where they hid the dead hippie bodies. They’d never have known we were there.”

I awarded myself a bonus point. I knew he’d like it. The laptop e-link software was outlaw sick. GPS coordinates constantly live-streamed through an LDS read-out in one corner of the screen against a resizable 3-D topographical map. I felt vindicated. This was 21st century mantracking at its finest.

“Hold up.” Tucker hunched forward, unnecessarily grasping the goggles with both hands. “Slow this thing down, Emmett. Jesus Jones, I think we found something.”

The image on the monitor was sketchy even maxed out on Hi-Def, but Tucker was right. There was something alien and boxy, obviously manmade in that harsh, natural landscape. I reduced the elevation and pushed the MAE closer.

A Chrysler Voyager minivan sat planted in a gravel wash at the base of Purgatory Ridge. Hitting control/S, I quickly saved the GPS coordinates. The van was parked in the hills at an elevation of 1,000 meters. It looked abandoned, but most importantly it had absolutely no business being off-road where it was.

I guided the MAE in. The Voyager was mired in sand, sitting cock-eyed on shredded tires and dented rims. All of its doors were opened to the elements. It was surrounded by a debris field of scattered personal effects and it had California rental car tags.

“Ho-ly shit, Canfield.” Tucker breathed. “I remember this BOLO. This van belonged to those Belgian tourists who went missing.”

I recalled the bulletin. Nine years back, in 2006, a Belgian family, two adults and one ten-year-old boy had checked out of a cheap L.A. hotel. They told the clerk they were going to tour Death Valley and Yosemite National Park and they vanished.

Tucker pulled the goggles off, swiping the puddled sweat under his eyes. “What the hell were they doing on Purgatory Ridge in a minivan? Dante’s View Road takes a 4X4 with high ground clearance when it’s even passable.”

“It’s GPS. It’s gotta be.” Shifting the laptop, I shared the view. “It’s still not completely accurate. It tells them to take a right, they turn right. Like what happened to that Latino couple who got lost in May.” I reset the MAE’s programming. The drone began to circle the van on a twenty meter perimeter. “It’s human nature to follow instructions even when you can see that you’re making a horrible mistake.”

“A horrible mistake like following a dry wash into a canyon thinking it’s a road?” Tucker peered at the monitor. “I don’t see any obvious remains. I know Inyo sent out a SAR. Called off the search after four days. Figured the Belgians wanted to start a new life in America. That they’d planned to disappear.”

Neither one of us stated the bald truth: no one survived Death Valley after four days.

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“You calling this in or am I?” Tucker reached for the Ford’s dashboard handset.

“Hold up.” We were speeding east on Saline Valley Road. I wanted to spot check the Cottonwood Creek trailhead before we turned for Purgatory Ridge. My mind was alive with possibilities, but there was one thing I knew for sure: Cottonwood Creek was the only place our dead hiker could have trekked in from. “Let’s investigate a little on our own. Besides, I need to retrieve the MAE. I don’t want the Staties getting to the find site before we do. Those pricks would confiscate the MAE just to piss me off.”

“What have we here?” Tucker kicked back, finishing his water and crumpling the bottle in his fist. “Canfield is seen making a non-Agency decision.” He repeated his crooked grin. “Always liked this side of you, Emmett. You should trot it out more often.”

“Hang on.” I bullied the Ford down a steep gravel grade. The corpse in the body bag rattled like a castanet as we four-wheeled the shortcut toward Cottonwood Creek. We didn’t encounter a single other person or vehicle as we raced across the wide salt plain, raising a dust plume that could be seen for miles.

An orange Subaru Crosstrek was sitting alone in the trailhead lot. Roaring up to it, we parked and got out.

“You’re going to have a busy day,” Tucker noted.

The Crosstrek had been looted. Some perp had shattered its rear window with a rock, reaching in to open the hatchback. Tinted glass shards littered the gravel, winking the bright afternoon sun into our eyes. A full carton’s worth of shredded silver protein bar wrappers tumbled end-over-end across the parking lot. A cooler had leaked its melting ice into the dirt next to a crushed quart-sized bottle of TrueBerry Blast and an empty man’s size 11 CheckPoint cross trainer shoebox.

“I’ll send for a tow truck to pick this up.” I added the vandalized SUV to my list.

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“What I don’t get,” Tucker pointed a finger down the road, “is why these Europeans keep coming here.”

The Ford was humming steadily as we climbed Purgatory Ridge. On the horizon, Dante’s Peak offered vertical scale for the immense vista of No Man’s Land desolation that surrounded us on all four sides. Two hundred meters below at the base of the sandstone cliff dust devils shimmied across the plain.

“It’s because Death Valley is the hottest, driest, lowest place on Earth.”

“I get that, I do. But why do they insist on camping? Stovepipe Wells has a nice resort. S’even got a decent-enough bar. What? There’s something wrong with good old-fashioned American air conditioning?”

“It’s the expense. For most of them Death Valley is a once-in-a-lifetime trip.” Pushing the Ford into 4WD, we started grinding down the wash. “It’s why they rent minivans. These hills cool down to eighty at night. They can camp more affordably.”

Even with the MAE’s coordinates programmed into my dashboard laptop that Plymouth Voyager was difficult to spot. Tucker saw it first. He straightened.

“Knuckles up. There she sits. Two o’clock.”

The van’s dull white paint had helped it blend almost perfectly into the bleached landscape. Parking the Ford one hundred meters off, I leaned against the steering wheel. The Voyager was buried up to its axels in a smooth lake of undisturbed granular sand. I couldn’t see any obvious signs of life or skeletal remains. I couldn’t see any human prints or tire treads at all. The hot sirocco winds that baked these hills had vaporized every sign of sentient life except for the meandering tracks of the ubiquitous burros.

“After you, amigo.” Tucker unlatched his door.

My boots crunched the sandy grit as I walked toward the van. Before I got there, Tucker stopped short, pointing at the ground.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Looks like a bunch of runners has been through here.”

“Those are burros.” I peered into the van’s opened passenger door. The dashboard was blanketed by thick inches of fine dust. “Their tracks can be misread as sneaker prints if you’re not careful.”

Tucker frowned, looking doubtful. “Sure ‘bout that?”

“Positive. People follow them into the hills thinking they lead to a trail someone’s been running on. Gets hikers in trouble all the time.”

He looked in from the driver’s side. “I can see they had a cellphone. It’s still plugged into the dash. Why didn’t they call for help?”

“They couldn’t.” I sidestepped the Voyager carefully, looking for any odd prints or clues. “This family got lost in 2006. Death Valley didn’t get cellphone reception until AT&T built the Furnace Creek tower in 2010.”

“How did they use GPS?”

“GPS is different technology. It’s based on satellite transmission. GPS service was sporadic in 2006, but they would’ve had access.”

“More nerd.” Folding his arms, he stared into the cargo bay. “That new Furnace Creek tower didn’t help these folks any.”

The cargo bay was as devoid of any recent signs of life as the front of the van had been. Even more layers of dust and fine sand lapped the three disheveled Tourister suitcases and the two unopened HiTracker ComfortDown sleeping bag cartons stored there.

“Something sure tore through this gear.”

“I think they did.” Removing the Personal Data Beacon from my belt, I started snapping *in situ* pictures. “At some point they must’ve realized they were facing a survival situation. It looks like they took what they thought they should carry.” I focused in and macro’d a line of tiny banded lizard prints. “Desert critters got what was left. They’re always hungry. Nothing goes to waste in Death Valley.”

“Speaking of critters,” Tucker said, “do you recall that Latino couple in Sulfur Spring saying they saw something big moving around outside their car once their headlights died? They said whatever it was walked by on two legs like a man.”

“What are you saying, Tucker?” I pulled back. “We’re mantracking Bigfoot now?”

“No, not Bigfoot, shithead, but how about a rogue military patrol out of China Lake? You have to admit something weird is going on, Emmett. These tourists keep disappearing.” His arm swept the expansive horizon. “Where do they go? We never even find their bones.”

I grew concerned. Tucker was starting to look white-eyed. The desert wind had picked up and it began to whistle and moan. Quickly resaving the Voyager’s GPS coordinates, I returned the PDB to my belt. “Weather’s changing, my friend. The sirocco’s got you spooked.” I knew Tucker well. He needed physical activity to break the Valley’s spell. “Go back to the Ford. Call CHPs and request a helicopter. I’ll collect the drone.”

“Roger that.” Tucker slowly turned on his heel. “Emmett, if you don’t mind I think I’ll hitch a ride back in the Seahawk if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure thing, buddy.” I joked. “Leave me out in the desert all alone.”

“Don’t be like that.” He frowned. “Besides, you like it lonely. I don’t. Tell you what. I’ll take the dead hiker back with me in the Seahawk. Drop him off at the Coroner’s in Independence.” He sweetened the deal. “Save you a full day’s round trip.”

I checked the setting sun. I still had two good hours of investigative daylight left and a three-gallon drum of potable water stored in the Ford. Besides, what Tucker had said was true. I never minded being left alone with Death Valley. It was humans who gave me trouble.

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Even as a kid, I had trouble sleeping. My busy brain gets hung up on a puzzling idea or a suggestion and then I toss and turn until I figure it out.

What bothered me most about these tourist disappearances was when a kid was involved. Adults were responsible for making their own poor decisions and for risking their own lives, but who watched out for the kids who counted on the adults for their safety? Voluntarily taking a child into a lethal environment never sat well with me. Besides, with their lower body mass it was always the kids who died first.

I threw my arm over my eyes. Something about that missing Belgian family would not let me rest, but what was it? It came to me so suddenly I sat up. The Voyager minivan had held *two* HiTracker sleeping bags. Kicking off the covers, I tripped over the startled dogs, stumbled into my office and booted up my Mac. Using control +F, I quick-scanned my NPS archive. I felt a cool pop of karmic satisfaction when I instantly located the file.

September, 2013. A Ranger patrol found a filthy HiTracker sleeping bag in the middle of a remote dirt road near Sulfur Spring. The road the bag was found on was routinely patrolled at

least once a month. The team reported that they had seen no tracks or obvious signs of distress. Since no one had reported the sleeping bag as missing it had been thrown out with the trash.

The Belgian family disappeared in July, 2006. The bag couldn't have been dropped by them because it would have been noticed during an earlier Ranger patrol. How did a HiTracker sleeping bag end up near Sulfur Spring seven years after the Belgians vanished? Sulfur Spring was eleven grueling desert miles from the abandoned van. Was Tucker right? Had someone else found the Voyager before us? Was there something else out in the desert?

Shit. There was only one way to resolve this. I quickly dressed, grabbed my PDB, my backpack, my hat, my canteen, and my keys. Giving Sam and Cracker a pat and one biscuit apiece I headed for Purgatory Ridge.

It never bothered me to travel into Death Valley alone. Rangers are trained to be independent thinkers. We're expected to cover a lot of ground and to handle every type of emergency. I've tackled heatstroke-related rescues, mental disturbance calls, trapped animals, and put out more car fires than I can count, but it's all worth it. Death Valley offers a mystic visionary kind of beauty that it only shares at night when lit by a nearly full moon.

I four-wheeled down the canyon wash. Tucker and the Inyo County SAR team had fine-tooth combed the area, searching for human remains. They had found nothing. The site was now pretty much trashed for any real tracking purposes. The sand looked churned. The tow crew had hauled the Voyager off to the car pound in Independence, leaving behind an open empty pit.

Locking the Ford, I circled the site to get a better feel for the larger overall landscape. This time maybe Tucker had given up on the SAR too early. I had a few fresh new ideas of my own.

Death Valley is a narrow basin trapped between the steep Amargosa mountain range to the east and the even steeper Panamint range to the west. The highest temperature ever known to man, 134 degrees Fahrenheit was recorded at Furnace Creek. It was common sense that anyone lost in the Valley would realize they needed to head into the cooler hills to survive. The question was: which way did those Belgians go?

Uplinking the PDB, I googled a GPS topo map. Three possibilities would've been known to the Belgians in 2006: a derelict borax mine in Badwater Canyon, some hillside caves used by the Timbisha Shosone or the abandoned Stone Cabin at the Sulfur Spring mining camp. GPS noted that the Sulfur Spring camp offered a year-round water supply. If I were the Belgians, which one would I have picked?

Programming Sulfur Spring into my PDB, I started hiking. PDBs are a new technology developed by the Army for military use in Afghanistan. They take GPS coordinates and plot the easiest, most energy efficient route across difficult terrain. A PDB route avoids any unnecessary up and downhill climbs caused by unseen gullies or ravines resulting in very little wasted effort. The Belgians wouldn't have had access to PDB technology in 2006, but I was sure glad I did. They would have had to stumble up and down those rugged slopes in the lethal heat, guessing at knolls and landmarks using purely visual sightlines.

I paused to imagine their trek. I loved the Valley's challenges, but I was prepared to meet them. The Belgians had been ill-prepared and trapped. When their water supply ran low and no help came they must've thought they had no choice but to go find a spring to survive. What had they experienced as they trudged up and down these brutal hills? Once you lose a quart of water your tongue thickens; it sticks to the roof of your mouth. You develop an intense headache over your eyes as your sinuses dry out. Your internal core temperature can rise to 105 degrees in less

than fifteen minutes because of over-exertion, resulting in delirium. What had they felt as they struggled across these ravines for eleven hard desert miles with limited water in July when the heat reflecting off the Valley floor pushed the ambient air temperature to 160 degrees?

I reached for my canteen. I'd been watchful, but a third of my water was gone. Even if it meant calling it quits before finding anything, once my canteen reached the half-empty mark I needed to turn back. That was non-negotiable. Checking the PDB, I saw another option. Squaw Spring was only a downhill tenth of a mile away. It meant backtracking which I hated to do, but I decided to chance the spring hoping for a refill so I could push on.

I started crab-walking sideways down the slope, careful not to slip and fall. Any injury out here could present a very real problem. The PDB guidance led me straight to Squaw Spring. The sagebrush surrounding it was withered brittle and white and the spring was bone dry.

Sifting the leached grit through my fingers, I spotted a slight green haze on a shrub further down the slope. Pushing the prickly lower branches aside, I knelt beside a seeping waterhole. Eagerly capturing each precious drop, I felt a very real sense of satisfaction as the canteen grew heavy again. There's always water in Death Valley if you know where to look.

Clipping the canteen back on my pack, I stood. Scanning a burro trail leading up the slope I spotted a single woman's street shoe tipped on its side. Even standing directly over the shoe it was difficult to see. The scorching sun had baked all the color out of it. Looking left, I saw a man's leather wallet next to a human femur. The wallet fell apart in my hands, but the international driver's license inside had been protected by a plastic sleeve. The name on the faded paper license read: Lukas Verbeke.

Now that I knew what to look for I spotted hundreds of weathered bone fragments scattered across the alluvial valley at the base of the ravine. From the sheer volume of the pieces

it was obvious that I was seeing more than one set of human remains. Slipping Lukas's license back into his wallet, I recalled their names from my file: Lukas, Marie-Louise, and ten-year-old Dieter. I gave the family credit for making it this far. Sulfur Spring was still five impossible miles away, but at least they died trying.

Did they ever realize how grave their peril was? Did Lukas and Marie-Louise lie to Dieter to keep his hopes up, to make him keep trying? As the family stumbled across these blistering hills had Lukas and Marie-Louise given Dieter all of their water, hoping he might make it to Sulfur Spring and survive? That would be an understandably human thing for any parents to do.

Did Dieter struggle on alone? If his parents gave him all of the water, how did he react to their deaths and with being left alone in this trackless foreign desert? He was only ten years old. How did he react to the abandonment?

Or, did the family choose to perish together, supporting each other until their final desperate collapse? And who died first? Lukas, Marie-Louise or Dieter because of his smaller body mass? I couldn't even be sure of how many sets of human remains I saw. The fragments were too degraded to individually identify. I'd need to leave that for SAR CSI.

Hot wind brushed the back of my neck. I looked up to see clouds bulking against Purgatory Ridge. A mean-looking storm was brewing. I wasn't worried about getting caught in a flash flood, but as exposed as I was on that hillside the idea of a lethal lightening strike did cross my mind since I was the tallest thing standing for miles. Time to take shelter and call for help. Emailing my GPS coordinates to the Inyo County SAR, I jumped when the PDB vibrated almost immediately in my hand.

"Where are you?" Tucker yelled. "What did you find?"

I unglued my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “I found the Belgians. Wasn’t Manson. Wasn’t China Lake.” I felt triumphant. This was a big win for me. “This bitch Valley killed them.”

“You stay put, Emmett. I’ll scramble my team, pull a Seahawk from CHPs. ETA 45 minutes. You stay safe.”

Yes, an evil storm was brewing, but I knew this Valley well. There was a Timbisha cave halfway up the bluff. It was a steep climb, but I could take shelter in the cave, safe from any lightening strikes. I had my GPS. I had my canteen. I could survive anything for an hour.

The V-shaped cave was deeper than I’d thought it would be. Not wanting to lose my GPS connection, I hunkered down near the entrance, taking a moment to drink my fill from the canteen. There was no need to ration my water anymore. The adrenaline rush from my discovery leached away, leaving me feeling drained and exhausted, but surprisingly jubilant. I had successfully followed this harrowing trail to its end. Tucker would never be able to challenge my tracking ability again.

Leaning my shoulder against the rough limestone wall, I studied the tracks in the sandy floor, noticing something odd. There were more tracks in here than had come from my boots. Flicking on the flashlight feature of the PDB, I lit them up. In addition to my TerraMax prints there was a line of crisp prints from a CheckPoint running shoe.

I heard pebbles slipping in the dimness behind me.

“*Bist du echt?*” He muttered.

Crap. Those runners in the hills weren’t feral burros. They were sneaker prints. Dieter didn’t die.

How does a ten-year-old boy stay alive in Death Valley alone for nine years? How did Dieter stay sane? My God. What did Dieter eat?

My knees turned to water as I recalled the dozens of missing tourists over the years and I reconsidered Tucker's story about the strange searching animal who walked by on two legs.

You win, Tucker. You were right. *This* is the end of the trail.

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