
The Invasion of Ragged Mountain

By Bill Russo

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Prologue

Along the starway of infinity there are millions of planets just like Earth. We need not be concerned with them. There are however many billions more that are not like Earth – these represent the biggest threat to humankind.

A slow moving, fragile rudimentary craft from the United States pierced the murky atmosphere of Jupiter on July 4, 2016. Strange cries, shouts and howls were captured by the ship's aural detectors. The voices, if indeed they were voices, were not made by carbon based lifeforms. The Space Agency quickly issued reports that derided the cries as nothing more than some sort of interference or radio static.

The collective mind of Earthlings however, is beginning to grasp the concept of intelligent life that is not carbon based. Such lifeforms may not even appear to be lifeforms to the primitive brains of the homo-sapiens.

Many of the beings are so different from humans, that they could not survive on an H-con planet (one based on Hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen). Conversely, the humans could not exist on planets like the Gas Giants – Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune and Saturn: known as the Juns. .

Superior intelligence is likely among the creatures of the Juns federation. They doubtless recognize humans as sentient beings – but most certainly regard earth creatures as cosmic infants.

What if the Gasmen of the icy giants decide to inhabit Planet Earth? How would they be able to adapt to an H-con orb?

Perhaps the invasion would start with a single icy Gasman. He might land his frosty ship on top of a frozen mountain. The story might unfold in a manner similar to 'The Invasion of Ragged Mountain' as told by a disc jockey spending a

solitary winter in an isolated dwelling on the flat top of the frigid mountain several hundred miles north of Montreal.

Chapter One: Ragged Mountain, Aroostook County, State of Maine

I'll tell you right up front that it's impossible. I am more isolated here than an astronaut in space. Nobody could have gotten up Ragged Mountain in the coldest and snowiest winter in a half century.

And yet as I sit before you now and see your disbelief, I tell you it did happen. It was five minutes before midnight. I remember the time exactly because I was giving the weather report which we always broadcast at 11:55 p.m., just before the news.

“The weather forecast for all of Northern Maine calls for more snow and a continuation of the extreme cold that has set records all the way from Bangor to Caribou. The overnight low will scrape the bottom of the thermometer at 20 below zero with a wind chill of minus 60. Residents are advised to stay indoors. The area police departments and National Guard troops are standing by to assist residents with heating problems. People in difficulty should call 911 statewide – except for customers of the Fort Kent Telephone Company, who are advised to dial Operator. Extra workers are on duty. Shelters have been set up in high schools and in the various campuses of State College.

“WNMR Meteorologist Jack Hambleton says that the record cold wave will continue for at least the next seven to ten days before any chance of moderation. The current temperature outside our studios atop Ragged Mountain is negative 12, with a further drop of eight degrees expected overnight to bring the temperature at dawn down to minus twenty below zero. Stay tuned for the national news from NBC Radio, which will be followed by your local and regional news brought to you as always by your local electric utility, the Maine Public Service Company.”

A verified temperature of minus 50 was recorded in Aroostook County in 2009. The previous record cold at Van Buren, in the County, was negative 48. Maine, besides being the most northerly of all the 48 states, is the coldest and snowiest.

The automated system kicked in after I gave the weather. It was programmed to play a few minutes of commercials followed by the network news feed. This gave me eight free minutes which I usually used to prepare my local newscast and bolt down a cup of strong coffee. My show runs from ten p.m. to three a.m. - the graveyard shift.

I gazed out the studio's picture window and watched the snow swirl around the five telephone poles that are strung around the tiny flat top of Ragged Mountain.

The poles are lit up like Christmas trees with large halogen street lamps arcing out from the top like long steel arms. Smaller marker lights, behind square protective cases, run down the pole at two foot intervals, stopping at a distance of four feet from the ground.

Each pole is the same. An amber light is first in line, a green light follows, then a red, and finally a blue. The sequence is repeated until the illumination reaches the big light at the top.

In winter I use the markers to gage the depth of the snow. That night I reported that the snow had just reached the red light, meaning that there were eight feet of frozen precipitation on the ground.

The first telephone pole is just a few feet beyond the studio, which is part of this cabin that also serves as living quarters for the announcer/engineer. As you well know, during the winter months no earthly vehicle has the capability of navigating the winding, steep five mile road that spirals around Ragged Mountain. Whoever takes the graveyard shift also has to live in the cabin by himself, in isolation for the entire winter.

During the day the radio station operates from studios and offices located in town, but at the start of my shift, the programming switches to here, the site of the transmitter, atop one of the largest mountains in the eastern United States. Though

we have a night time signal of only 5,000 watts, it reaches all of Northern Maine as well as parts of several other states and a few provinces in Canada.

I have a large audience and if mail were able to be delivered, I would have received anywhere from a few dozen to a hundred cards and letters a week. The correspondence goes to the station, where they save it for me until June when the roads open up.

You have probably heard the show. The music that I play is eclectic, ranging from folk performers like Pete Seeger to country performers such as Merle Haggard as well as some Jazz classics by Stan Kenton, Bill Russo, and Dave Brubeck, along with selected pieces from my personal extensive collection of hit 45 rpm vinyl records from the 1950s on.

The second illuminated pole is in the parking lot, which has four spaces. Only one was occupied. That, by my car, currently buried a few feet below the crusty surface of the snow and ice.

No attempts are ever made to shovel or plow anything on this little mountain tabletop that is home to the transmitter, the cabin that houses the studio, and two attached supply buildings.

I peered out the window that night and tried to look up beyond the pole into the sky but it was as if there were a ceiling fabricated of solidified, dark clouds, just above the halogen lamp.

The storm was intensifying. I lost sight of the pole in the parking lot by my car and could barely see the one right next to the window, due to the thick, speeding, wind-blasted snowflakes.

I felt a chill though the room was warm. I started to look away when unbelievably I spied something that looked like a shaggy ape walking towards the window.

Chapter Two: The Beast was Hairy and Massive

With vision clouded by a thick wall of driven snow obscuring the light from the halogen lamp, I observed that the thing advancing slowly on top of the frozen snow was huge.

When it paused at the illuminated pole just outside the window its head was well above the blue light on the pole. That marker lamp is up 16 feet. Discounting the snow on the ground, it meant that the creature was probably as high as the basketball hoops in the gym at the University of Maine in Fort Kent - ten feet.

Picking up the telephone to contact the police department, I was midway through punching in the numbers when I realized the phone was dead. I checked my transmitter meters to make sure the radio station was still on the air. It was.

A tapping at the window froze me before I could think of what to do next. Because the snow was so deep, the thing at the window had to kneel in order to be able to see inside.

I realized then that the fur it was encased in was no more than a very heavy arctic type overcoat with an expansive hood that obscured much of the face of the improbable 'visitor'. I could tell now that I had been mistaken about his height. He was probably no more than six feet.

Reaching inside his coat the man withdrew a square of cardboard with large printed letters....

“Please Help. My chopper went down. Let me in.”

I hadn't heard a helicopter, though with the howl of the wind, it's unlikely that I would have been able to. It's also improbable that a chopper could have safely landed on the mountain during a blizzard.

But there he was. Outside my window with his breath coming out in ragged gasps that turned to icy vapor as they hit the glass. What could I do? Against my better judgment, because I knew no mortal man could have been on the mountain top that night, I let him in.

In winter, the only entrance to the cabin is via that outside set of stairs leading to the roof. I pointed towards the stairs and he understood. I walked up to the rooftop door and opened it. He came through and said, “Thank you for being here and for allowing me in.”

We walked down to the living quarters with no further dialogue. I was still shaken and in disbelief that anyone could have somehow found their way to the top of Ragged Mountain.

I led him to the kitchen and offered him a seat while I turned on the front burner of the LP gas stove and started a pot of coffee – percolated, the old fashioned way. Remembering that I was supposed to be delivering the local news, I dashed back to the studio just as the network broadcast was wrapping up.

I flipped on my microphone and gave a quick station ID and pushed a button that started a 60 minute transcribed program. With mixed excitement and fear, I darted back to the kitchen to converse with the impossible guest.

He had taken off his winter coat, gloves, hat and boots and was dressed almost the same as I was – flannel shirt, jeans, and moccasins. Looking around the room quickly I thought it odd that I did not see where he had put his heavy coat.

As we went in the living room to sit down and talk, I realized I had greatly exaggerated his height. He was actually almost the same as me, about five foot eight. That wasn't too unusual, but I found it strange that he had a chin scar that was identical to mine.

I mentioned it to him. ...Told him I got mine in a college wrestling match. He remarked that by coincidence, he acquired his in the same way.

“Really? What school did you go to?”

“The same college as you,” replied the visitor with a smile that was more a grimace than a grin.

He looked at me in disgust and with no provocation sprang at me. As he flew towards me I noticed that his face was identical to mine.

The ferocity of his charge knocked me from my chair. Using my wrestling skills acquired in four years of high school wrestling and four more at college, I took the attacker to the floor and tried to pin him.

With amazing strength and agility he countered my every move. As we grappled for a while it became apparent to me that the intruder had skills that were the exact equal of mine. In fact everything about him was identical to me.

“Who are you?” I demanded as he twisted out of the half nelson that I applied.

He stopped for a moment. I too froze in place. We were like statues with sinewy arms extended trying to strangle each other. Still motionless, he snarled.

“I am not you. But in a few seconds I will be you and you will be a frozen stick in a snow bank.”

As he spoke, his skin darkened. Millions of sepia hairs began sprouting and spreading weed-like over his torso which was also growing at the rate of a foot every few seconds.

In less than a minute he had transformed into a ten foot tall hirsute ape-ish creature. The thing advanced towards me. I made a grab for an axe that I use to split wood for the fireplace. The gorilla-like monster tore it from my hands and grasped the end of the handle in one ham sized paw and the blade in the other. Holding it high above his head like a trophy, he snapped it in two.

Fear glued me to the floor. I couldn't run. I stood there waiting for death. The monster tossed the head of the axe away and jammed the handle in his mouth like an oversized cigar. With a loud grinding he began chewing the wooden end. As

easily as a man, eating peanuts he gnawed away at the axe handle. He extracted it from his mouth, revealing a perfectly formed, wooden dagger.

Lifting his hairy arm above his head, he prepared to plunge the weapon deep into my chest when a blast of water hit him in the face. The behemoth looked wild-eyed and frightened. With a wimper as streams of water soaked him, the beast collapsed to the floor.

Dozens of tiny jets of tepid water kept drizzling down and whipped the beaten attacker into little more than a soaked rug.

Water.

The creature had been felled by water - just as gorillas in the wild are said to become immobilized by sudden rain showers and are unable to move, even when being attacked by lions.

You might well ask where the water came from. My coffee pot! I had lit the gas stove as you will remember. I put on the coffee but then forgot about it. Shortly after the water boiled away, the pot became over heated and the sensors in the cabin's alarm system thought there was a fire. The sprinkler system was activated and poured a 'rain' of terror on the fiend.

By the time the ogre had transformed back into a human shape, I had my revolver trained on it. When it poised to attack me again, I had no choice but to empty my gun into it.

Dragging the body to the roof, I pitched it into the snow. When the phone was back in service, I called the police department and you said that you would get here as soon as the weather allowed. So here you are.

“We were able to land today. But I am not sure that we will be able to leave because the weather is worsening. We may have to stay here a while,” said the Chief of the tiny Maine town of St. Ange and the surrounding unincorporated villages. He had arrived with a pilot and one of his deputies.

While the chief was interviewing the disc jockey in the radio studio, the pilot Jim Burroughs and Jack Daly, the deputy, were in the kitchen having coffee and a sandwich. Almost before they had finished their meal, the chief came bursting into the room.

“We’re done here boys. We have to leave now before the weather gets worse. I have finished the investigation. Nothing happened. The isolation of Ragged Mountain made the disc jockey a little crazy. He’s seeing things that are not really there. Get in the chopper now. We have to go right away.”

Deputy Jack Daly had never seen the chief so jumpy. In the years they had worked together, they had faced down guns before, as well as rowdy gangs, and professional mobsters. Chief Bert Daigle had never been as ‘flapped’ as he was right then, after a ten minute interview with a disc jockey.

“C’mon Jack. Snap it up. We gotta go!!” the Chief persisted.

“Okay Bert. I will just be a second, you go on up those stairs boss, and I will be right behind you. I’m sorry but you know I’m on that bladder medicine. I just have to use the head for a few seconds and then I’ll be along.”

“Make it quick. Burroughs is going to start the helicopter and I will wait for you at the top of the stairs.”

Daly headed for the bathroom but after the chief had started up the steps, he moved swiftly towards the radio studio and pushed open the door.

There was a body on the floor. A wooden dagger made from an axe handle was protruding from the corpse’s throat. Daly blinked his eyes and then blinked them again because he could not believe what he was seeing. The chief had been interviewing the disc jockey. But the dead guy on the floor was not the dee-jay. It was the chief, himself!

Daly went back to the kitchen and collapsed into a chair.

“Jack. Let’s go,” came the chief’s urgent call, shouted from the top of the stairs.

Daly pushed open his heavy coat and drew out his Glock.

“I am coming right now Chief”

Softly, he added, “I’m Coming for you, whoever and whatever you are.”

Epilogue

So ends the Invasion of Ragged Mountain. Along the starway of infinity there are billions of Gas Giants. No life can exist in the Juns federation or on any gas planets.

Keep saying it. No life can exist on the gas giants. While you say it, keep an eye out for The Gas Man.