

My Mind's Eye

By

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In the particle-accelerator control room, I was trying to keep careful watch on the beam energy since we were at unprecedented high levels. Unfortunately, keeping watch was becoming more and more challenging as my cataracts progressed. Out of the corner of my eye however, I saw something move in the off-limits detector area. There was a floating iridescent squished sphere that disappeared, and then there was a floating iridescent torus which had also promptly disappeared. "What the hell?" We were looking for new particles but they were supposed to stay inside the detector--not fly around outside it.

Quickly, I slapped down the big red emergency Off button and spilled the coffee in front of me. "Good one, Louis," I muttered.

While I was looking for something to mop up the mess, the phone rang. It was Pierre, the night shift manager. "Why are the proton and antiproton beams off?" he demanded.

I wasn't sure what to say. I was still trying to keep my vision problems from him; he'd take me out of the rotation if he knew. But I'd definitely seen something. I knew cataracts didn't make you see stuff that wasn't there--they kept you from seeing what was right in front of your face. While I was thinking, I wiped the coffee spill up with my sleeve.

"Louis? Answer me. Thanks to you, we're going to lose detector data."

I pictured persnickety Pierre's moustache twitching like a mouse's whiskers. I took a deep breath. "Something moved in the detector area."

"That's not possible. The beam will not start unless the detector area is evacuated. And if it was a person, the radiation would kill him immediately--he wouldn't have time to move around."

"I know that," I said. "I've been doing high-energy physics since before you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye."

"Tell me exactly what you saw, old man," he growled.

Old man? I bet I could still whip his scrawny ass. "I'm telling you, there was something moving in the off-limits area."

I thought back. What I'd seen in my peripheral vision didn't make sense. Uh oh. It was still before dawn. Had I fallen asleep? "I didn't get a great look at it. Maybe we should check the security tapes?"

"You bet your ass I'll be checking the security tapes," Pierre said with undisguised disgust.

The security tapes didn't show anything but two blurry blobs in quick succession. The security team went in and looked around but they didn't find anything. Pierre was pissed, so he suspended me and promised to 'initiate termination proceedings'. If this was it, what an ignominious end to an illustrious career.

Thus, I found myself at 6:00 a.m. waiting at the security desk for my daughter to pick me up, like I was a little kid in the principal's office. No doubt about it, that Pierre was a pain in the behind; I regretted ever hiring him. The irony of being fired by a kid I hired wasn't lost on me. Maybe when I retired as Lab Director, I should have retired all-together. But since my wife passed, all I had was my job and my daughter.

As I sat in the lobby twiddling my thumbs, I heard, "Good morning Professor Johnson," coming out of the security guard's mouth. He wasn't talking to me--not with that pleasant tone.

"Good morning, Juan," my beautiful daughter said. "And I told you to call me Louise."

I stood up and looked in the direction of my daughter. Every time I saw her, I remembered the tiny baby my wife and I brought home from the hospital, the leaky-diapered Louise as she took her first steps, the exuberant Louise as she rode her bike down the driveway for the first time, the nervous valedictorian Louise giving her speech, and the proud confident Louise in her Ph.D. robes. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, Pop," she said. "I guess you're stirring up trouble down here as usual?" She grinned--at least it sounded like she did. "Shall we go?"

After we got in the car she said, "So what happened?"

"I saw something in the detector area."

"You saw something!" Louise said. "So is your vision clearing up then?"

I hadn't told her the doctor said my vision would only clear up with surgery. And there was no way I was going to get surgery. That's what did in my wife. "Peripheral vision," I muttered.

"It sounds like turning off the beam was the right thing to do," she said, starting the car.

"Do you believe me?" I asked, looking forward so I could see her out of the corner of my eye.

"Of course." She glanced at me and smiled. "So, where to now? Home?"

Imagining my empty house made me sigh. I pushed down the lump in my throat.

Louise shot me a sympathetic look. She could read me like a book; she was like her mother that way. "I can't get used to the idea of you rattling around in that big house by yourself," she said. "How about we go out for pancakes?"

I nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

When the waitress brought my fancy baked pancake, it was the biggest one I'd ever seen. It even peeked out from behind my blurry spot. "How am I supposed to eat all that?"

Louise giggled. "Just wait a second. It'll deflate."

Sure enough, after a minute or so, it sunk down to a more reasonable size, and I dug into it.

Louise had already attacked her ultra-thin Swedish pancake with gusto.

"Who knew pancakes came in so many shapes and sizes," I said.

She took a sip of coffee. "Yeah. Mine's so thin it's two-dimensional, but yours is definitely three-dimensional, or technically, including time, four-dimensional."

I took another giant bite. "This is really good," I said with my mouth full of egg, apple, and cinnamon.

"I'm glad you like it. So, who or what did you see in the detector area?" she asked, leaning over the table. "I'm dying to know."

I told her about the weird flying sphere and torus things.

She was suitably impressed. "How bizarre!" she said. "I wonder what they were? Could they be debris from a new particle?"

"That was my first thought," I said. "But they weren't aligned in the direction of the beam. And why would they make it through all the detector plates only to stop in the air outside the control room?"

We debated the issue the rest of breakfast until Louise's phone rang. As she talked, her face flushed.

"We have to get back to the lab ASAP!" she finally said, hanging up the phone.

"I'm suspended, remember? Are you sure I can come?" I asked.

"Yes, you can come. That was Pierre on the phone."

"Let's go then." I threw some money on the table and we ran out the door. In the car, we gunned it and soon pulled into the lab parking lot.

At the lab we ran to the control room. When we got there, Pierre was standing like a statue as columns twisted in the air. At least that's what it looked like to me. Rainbows shimmered on their surfaces like the top of an oil slick.

Louise gasped. "Bizarre. I can't quite see it."

"What is it?" Pierre said. "There's something here, but I can't focus on it."

I could see it. "Try your peripheral vision."

"I see something!" Louise yelled. "It looks like a rainbow!"

Then the columns disappeared.

Moments later new columns appeared several feet away. Their undulating forms started to pinch in the middle and then sparks erupted from the edge of a piece of electrical equipment as one of the columns grazed it.

"You didn't turn off the beam?" I asked, hitting the Off button, but keeping my eyes on the apparitions.

Pierre said, "What if it's some kind of particle debris? This is the highest energy ever achieved on earth."

I resisted the urge to say 'Duh'; he was my boss after all. I pointed at the columns that were splitting in two, forming four smaller columns. "They're still here and there's no power. They can't be from the particle beams."

They disappeared again.

"You were saying?" Pierre said. I imagined him smirking.

His comment was interrupted by eight floating shimmering blobs appearing in the control room. And two of them were right near Louise.

She froze with a horrified look on her face I hadn't seen since she was ten and falling out of that oak tree. "What's happening?"

Over my dead body would I let something happen to my girl! "No!" I yelled and smacked the things away from her. They felt like squishy metal--cool and smooth but yielding to my touch.

The other six objects followed and all eight fell toward the floor. And then they stopped and turned around, moving as one, in my direction.

I backed away but was quickly stopped by a workstation behind me in the small room.

The things followed me, one hitting a computer and causing more sparks to erupt. Pierre was edging out the door. "Maybe we should get out of here."

I held up my hands, prepared to fight I-didn't-know-what as the things cornered me.

"Dad!" Louise said. "Be careful!"

"I'll, uh, go get help," Pierre said from the hall. He took off.

"Louise, please get out of here," I said. I was surrounded but they weren't touching me.

"I'm not leaving you," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

It was just like when she turned sixteen and insisted on getting a job. "Please, honey. I can't lose you, too."

"I'm not leaving you, and that's final." She took a step closer. "Are you scared? It's almost like they're looking at you," Louise whispered.

"That would imply..." In my mind's eye I thought over all I'd managed to see: a sphere, a torus, two columns, four columns, eight blobs. "What if it's one creature? One creature that lives in more than four dimensions."

"The beam," she said, catching on immediately. "We passed a new energy threshold. We must have caught their, er, it's attention." Her look of surprise was replaced by the look of wonder she had the first time she looked into a telescope.

"What now?" she asked.

It was just like the time I met her multi-pierced Harley-riding tat-covered high school boyfriend. I took a deep breath.

"Now we try to communicate with it."