

Equinox Society Radio 004

My Dear Strangers,

I remember sitting in high-school bio, squirting a medicine dropper of water under a microscope, and staring at this tiny celery thing that moved its tentacles around. I knew microscopic organisms existed but seeing a real-live hydra was a trip.

Another time I found Saturn with a telescope. I grew up seeing pictures of Saturn and drawing it with crayons, but looking through a lens at the actual planet, with its rings and moons, at a distance of 750 million miles... there was a real holy-shit factor.

Imagine being Galileo and discovering Saturn's rings before anybody else, or being the first person to get a close-up look at a hydra. The universe seems one way and then, suddenly, the planets aren't gods and a drop of water contains an ecosystem.

Experiences like this don't make the world weirder. They show us the world is already weirder than we realized.

This is Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.

Tonight's first report is from society member Hank Ridley.

A high-school chemistry teacher in Florida turned spectacularly luminous in front of his 10:30 A.M. class on April 30. Donald Eggerton was burning a piece of magnesium ribbon when the flame travelled up his arm, spread to his chest, and rapidly engulfed him.

The students panicked. Many fled the room blindly, unable to see in the ultra-bright glare. Numerous minor injuries were sustained during the stampede. One student suffered a minor concussion after running headfirst into the doorframe.

The light was so intense out the classroom windows, witnesses reported seeing the glow from a mile away.

Mr. Eggerton's screams were heard throughout the school. Another teacher and a hall monitor entered the classroom and were immediately stunned by the glare. They did their best to help the blinded students out of the room.

Two students—Taylor Smith and Mitchell Cook—held up their jackets to block the glare, followed the sound of Mr. Eggerton's cries, and tried using their jackets to smother the burn.

Mr. Eggerton fell to the floor and kept burning, but the students felt no heat and their jackets were undamaged.

Approximately ninety seconds after the event began, the flare abruptly ended, leaving Mr. Eggerton almost entirely unharmed. He suffered no burns, and the profound afterglow experienced by himself and everyone present resulted in no permanent vision loss.

Mr. Eggerton was unable to explain what had happened. He described a mysterious visual phenomenon he alone experienced in the glare of his own conflagration. He claims that while he was burning, he perceived that he was surrounded by people, like “shadows in the light”. He insists the people were not the students in the room.

“They were walking around as calmly as people in a park,” he said. “But once they noticed *me*, they all started to turn and move in my direction. There were hundreds of them, maybe more, and there was something so familiar about them. I’ve never felt so terrified. That’s why I screamed, not because of any pain. And then for one second, I realized who they were, and I wasn’t scared anymore. It was like having the most incredible epiphany—like every scientist in history had shown me their discoveries at once. And then it was over. The shadow people were gone, and I couldn’t remember who they were or what I’d learned. But they were there. They were real and it’s important. It’s the most important thing that’s happened in my life.”

Mr. Eggerton resumed teaching the following Monday and began to talk obsessively about the event. He repeatedly questioned his students from the 10:30 class about their own experiences that morning, asking if they saw the shadow people or remembered any revelations. None of the students did, and after several days, the administration encouraged Mr. Eggerton to resume his standard teaching.

Numerous students and locals have taken to visiting Mr. Eggerton after school in his garage to watch his daily attempts to recreate the event with other magnesium ribbons.

“He’s so hyped, he’s like a mad genius,” his student Marcus Johnson said. “We all stand around wearing sunglasses, watching him burn shit. We’re rooting for him.”

Another student, Kay Bower, said, “I think he went to another dimension or something. Or maybe it was heaven, you know? Maybe it was hell.”

Mr. Eggerton himself disbelieves in traditional afterlives, but he remains openminded about alternate dimensions or hallucinogenic visions.

“I know I’m only a high-school teacher,” he said, “but I’m a scientist. I’ve never felt fear and elation together like that. Aside from my personal sensory experience, there’s the mystery of the burn itself, which wasn’t in my head. Something happened that morning and I need to understand it.”

Hank Ridley
Equinox Society Reporter

Do you ever have those nighttime freakouts when you realize nobody has the answers? When I was a kid, I was comforted that my parents knew how to handle things. When I was a teenager, I was comforted that science, and art, and religion had figured things out. And then I was an adult, and I realized everybody's just flailing around like hydras.

It's scary as hell. I spent so many years believing older, more experienced people had the big answers. But now I am one of the older people, and I don't feel particularly wise, and most people my age and older are pretty clearly winging it. I can't figure out how to stay physically and emotionally healthy at the same time. I have no idea what'll happen when I die. I have unreliable guesses about the meaning of life. And shouldn't I have mastered relationships by now? Shouldn't I have a better sense of my identity?

And these are just the things we all deal with—stuff we might collectively figure out to some degree. When something unprecedented happens, we're on our own. No book or expert in the world is going to explain it.

As far as I know, no one's ever burned magnesium quite like Mr. Eggerton, let alone seen a host of shadow people in its light. He believes he experienced something important and he's exploring now. Maybe he'll find an answer. But probably not. You know how those things go—even basic experiments can be hard to replicate, because things go wrong and variables change and reality is always stranger than we expect it to be. Mr. Eggerton might burn magnesium the same way a thousand times, but maybe the essential element was the precise time of day, or the number of people in the room, or the amount of Cheerios he ate for breakfast that morning.

Whatever it was, I wish him safety and success. He isn't waiting around for somebody else to give him answers.

We have one more story tonight. It comes from Claire Maple, who likes nothing better than a unique, disturbing mystery. In this case, it's a baby. She sent me the following email.

Hey, it's Claire.

Here's a weird one. By weird I mean creepy as fuck and just the kind of thing that makes me dread-love my job.

I met a woman named Melissa who's been pregnant for seven years. Twenty-six trimesters to be exact. I heard about her from an anonymous tip on The Blackboard and drove out to meet her in an office park where she does payroll for a mortgage lending company.

Melissa's unmarried and wouldn't talk about the baby's father except to say he's a full-time YouTube gamer and no love lost on either side. She's 49% pretty and looks right at the tipping point of "don't ask about her due date in case she isn't actually pregnant". Picture a mousy thirty-year-old woman with a shopping-mall haircut and the beer belly of a middle-age man.

Little backstory here. Melissa's coworkers like her OK and she's a payroll whiz, no professional complaints whatsoever, but everybody thinks she's crackers. Not dangerous crackers but sad crackers. Because she announced her pregnancy to everybody twenty-five trimesters ago, and there was an office baby shower and everything, and then... no baby.

People assume she miscarried and traumatically fooled herself into believing she's pregnant, because she's been talking about her unborn baby ever since. Not excessively, just casual references like, "I can't drink alcohol because..." or, "He kept me up all night with his kicks."

So yeah, chances seemed pretty good that she was very sad crackers, and the baby was nothing but a terrible delusion and a little extra weight around the midriff. Except I felt the kicks. She let me put my hand on her womb and let me tell you, that was one real kick. I felt the little thing's heel.

And then Melissa told me her cousin's an obstetrician who gives her regular checkups and ultrasounds, and there's a baby all right. She (meaning the cousin, I talked to her in person, too) keeps the situation hush-hush because she's afraid Melissa and her baby'll get locked in a lab somewhere and experimented on, etc., and while I'm not a big government-science-conspiracy theorist, I'd err on the side of hush-hush, too.

The baby doesn't grow or develop anymore. It just floats around in there, kicking and sucking up nutrients and dreaming whatever bizarro stuff babies dream. It's like Melissa's amniotic fluid is the fountain of youth, and there's a little human being floating in the goo and never aging and holy shit, if she could bottle that fluid she'd be a trillionaire.

I interviewed her. Here are the highlights.

ME: Congratulations, I guess!

HER: Thank you. I feel very blessed.

ME: What's your son's name?

HER: Timothy.

ME: Most mothers I've known start to feel extremely "get this thing out of me" by the end of the third trimester. How're you feeling after seven years of pregnancy?

HER: I worried a lot in the first year, but once I understood he was healthy and safe, I was OK with him staying inside. My hormones reached a wonderful balance. I have a permanent pregnancy glow, and I'm not in any discomfort. I think a lot of mothers would love this experience. I'm always with my baby. He doesn't get sick, he's never alone. He's growing up in a perfect environment.

ME: He isn't really growing up, though, is he?

HER: He isn't physically growing but he's happy and alive. He's always growing closer to me. I don't think the average seven-year-old is anywhere near this connected to his mother.

Quick side note from Claire: The whole time I was interviewing her, Melissa talked with a kind of obligatory but good-natured patience. Like you know when a musician's a one-hit wonder, and it's all anybody asks them about, and then a decade passes, and they've released other music, and for a while they're annoyed that everybody keeps asking them about the one big hit, but eventually they make peace with it, and gladly talk about the song, and embrace the fact that people think they did something special? Melissa acted like that. Her baby's the equivalent of A-ha's "Take on Me". Back to the interview.

ME: You've mentioned Timothy's biological father is a YouTuber gamer. I wonder if he passed along an arrested-development gene.

HER: I've made the same joke. The big difference is that Timothy's reached his full potential.

ME: Has he?

HER: He can't help that his body won't develop. He can't make himself be born. He's perfectly himself, doing everything a baby his age is capable of doing.

ME: But I guess that's my point. He'd be capable of so much more if he were *out*. Do you feel any maternal urge to help him live a fuller life?

HER: I can't force his birth.

ME: Have you considered a C-section?

HER: God, no. That'd be extremely dangerous at his stage of development.

ME: You'll never get to see him or hold him. You'll never talk to him.

HER: I talk to him all the time. I'm holding him all the time.

ME: But aren't you concerned he's missing out? He'll never ride a bike, or see the ocean, or make out with a prom date. He'll never have a life of his own.

HER: He'll never get hooked on drugs or have his heart broken, either. He'll never have to worry about the news or feel alone.

ME: This takes helicopter parenting to a new level, though. I'm not an advocate of childhood trauma and shitty life experiences, but skinned knees and emotional broken noses are part of the deal. I'm sure you've met kids who are so sheltered their innocence is unnerving. You just *know* they're either going to be victimized or turn into serial killers. I'm not a parent, so what do I know, but at some point, doesn't a kid need to live his own life?

HER: If I suddenly went into labor, I wouldn't try to fight that. I'm making the best of a unique situation, which is what every good parent does with every individual child.

ME: Why do you think this is happening to you and Timothy?

HER: I have no idea. Why can some woman get pregnant when others can't no matter what? Why do some babies have disabilities while others have amazing natural gifts?

ME: Yeah but, this isn't like, "Geez, my baby's colorblind." This is one in a billion. Unprecedented, far as we know. You've got to have some gut-level theory.

HER: I've had lots. Proof that God has a plan for him. Proof that there isn't any God and nothing makes sense. An experimental drug somebody slipped into my drink. Extraterrestrial impregnation. But I don't believe in crazy things. I'm a very normal woman, very grounded. I think theorizing is less important than enjoying what I've got. We're happy together. We have a good life.

ME: That's incredibly Zen of you. I don't personally roll that way, but I appreciate how you're just like, "I love my permanently unborn baby Tim and I'm awesome at my payroll job."

HER: Thank you. I appreciate that.

ME: May I ask you one more question? It's a tough one.

HER: OK.

ME: He's snug as a bug in there. Not really aging, and there's no indication that'll change. What if this goes on for so long, he finally outlives you? What if you die first?

HER: I guess they'll cut him out. Maybe that'll be his time.

Claire here. I got to say, I liked Melissa, and she didn't strike me as crackers, which would actually be understandable given the situation. She seems like a good mother with her head on straight.

I couldn't resist buying Timothy a gift, and I spent a long, drunk time brainstorming ideas. I finally went with one of those of giant human-egg balloons you can get inside and bounce around in, along with an Emerson CQC-7BW close quarters combat knife, so if Timothy's ever born and has a simultaneous impulse to crawl back into the womb *and* cut his way out, he can reenact both in the comfort of his own backyard. I'm going to hang onto them for the time being, because it feels like a weird set of gifts to hand a pregnant mother.

I'll say again, I dread-love my job.

Later,
Claire

Good gifts. I think I'd enjoy them, too. Some days more than others.

I don't know what to make of Mr. Eggerton's magnesium burn or Timothy's extended stay in his mother's womb. But I do like that neither Eggerton nor Melissa are clutching at lazy answers.

I like to think I'd be that openminded and positive, but sometimes I can't even hack ordinary mysteries. Friendships fall apart without explanation, sex remains confusing, happiness comes and goes like weather, and the fact of my impending death can give me a shivering fit in the bathroom at 1 A.M.

What's the best outlook? Is it active exploration, like Mr. Eggerton, or passive acceptance, like Melissa? The right approach to a mystery is also a mystery. It's another thing we each have to answer on our own.

Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.

Join our mailing list at EquinoxSociety.com, or follow The Equinox Society on Facebook and Instagram.

Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "Take on Me" by A-ha.

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.