

## **WALT MULLEN'S HIPPOPOTAMUS**

The two cops sitting together in Doreen's Coffee Shop on Main Street could have been talking about anything. Or so a casual observer would think, and would perhaps be inclined - on the basis of his knowledge or, more likely, ignorance, of police business - to create a conversation when the actual one could not be heard. Said observer would note the older cop - a sergeant - doing most of the talking, and the younger cop - who might have vaguely reminded the observer of his wife's nephew Dennis, who had been an EMT in Weymouth before moving to Maryland to become a forest ranger - listening intently, nodding almost constantly as he absorbed pearl after pearl of police wisdom from the older man.

Such might be the impression, but it would be wrong. Actually the sergeant - let's call him "Ed" - was telling the kid - let's call him "Jerry" - about an incident famous in Cape Cod police history, an incident many years in the past but still discussed wherever Cape policemen gathered: the case of Walt Mullen's hippopotamus.

Ed the sergeant had carefully laid down a safe comfortable carpet of indisputable facts for Jerry: the particulars of the sighting (a Sunday night in July, good weather, normal road conditions, not much activity apart from a noisy party or two and a few leftover fireworks, then the first 911 call describing an enormous greyish animal seemingly browsing contentedly alongside Route 6 near the Harwich/Dennis border), the identity of the caller (an otherwise reputable roofer and shellfisherman, married, father of twins, choir member, Little League coach from Sandwich named Walt Mullen), the (somewhat reluctant) commencement of an investigation by units of both the Harwich and Dennis PDs ... to the recounting of these things and more did young Jerry listen, his amazement growing despite Sergeant Ed's conscious efforts to present the material as unemotionally as possible.

Was there perhaps in the back of Jerry's mind a tiny voice warning him of some prank, some necessary rite of passage being gently inflicted on him by the older cop in accordance with an arcane tradition reaching back into the days of the Cro-Magnons? Indeed there was. But something in the older officer's demeanor convinced Jerry that leg-pulling was not at issue here. He was not being asked to believe in the existence of snipe-hunts or mail-buoys or jackalopes or any of a

thousand hoary urban legends concocted for the delight of veterans at the expense of rookies. No, Sergeant Ed was serious.

And what do we know about Walt Mullen? The list of clinical facts about the man reported him to be a solid citizen, one not likely to risk his reputation with bogus 911 calls. But several strange facts emerged later of which Sergeant Ed may not have been aware: first, Walt Mullen had long cherished a desire - as expressed in his 1993 Sandwich High School yearbook - to become a big game hunter, a desire he apparently abandoned after repeatedly failing various color-blindness tests (thus an otherwise cryptic note in Walt's diary from that time: "horse = mule = zebra"); second, Walt Mullen had in the preceding fiscal year attended three night-school classes in Falmouth: "Tire Repair for Beginners", "Intermediate Bantu," and "Deconstructing the Theology of Saint Augustine"; third, Walt's wife Bunny reported that just prior to the alleged sighting, her husband had renounced his long-standing love for pepperoni pizza in favor of mushroom topping. Strange behavior, she said, in a man she loved and thought she knew ...

Is one permitted to see the emergence of a pattern here?

Very well, then: let us abandon speculation for the nonce and return to the world of cold hard facts, especially to the res (or, if you prefer, the crux) of the case: the existence or non-existence of a grazing hippopotamus along route 6 on that July night.

Let us stipulate - despite howls of protest from the countless fans of quantum mechanics out there - that Yes-Hippo and No-Hippo cannot co-exist in our (admittedly limited) three-dimensional universe. The police units roused to action by Walt Mullen's 911 call that night could either find a hippo - thereby setting off one train of causes and effects - or not find a hippo - thereby setting off another train of causes and effects. These two trains might begin their metaphorical journey in the same roadside meadow, but they would end in vastly different corners of the Universe (was it Euclid or Newton, or maybe Professor Irwin Corey, who crafted the beloved joke whose punchline involves the phrase "a hell of a way to run a railroad"? The question is perhaps worth asking!)

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It is unlikely that any of the preceding considerations were in the minds of Sergeant Ed and rookie Jerry as they sat that peaceful morning enjoying, each in his own way, Doreen's double hazelnut special. As we return to this homely scene, Sergeant Ed is just gulping down the last of a "death by jelly" doughnut served him by Pam, the comely quasi-blonde waitress who has a barely-concealed crush on Jerry and wants to have his baby (as time and resources permit).

Jerry has been silent for these many minutes, wrestling with who knows what demons of doubt. "But the hippo - did they ever find it?" he finally manages to ask as Sergeant Ed daintily attends to a powdered-sugar-on-the-navy-blue-tie situation.

"Well now, that's a very interesting and perceptive question," replies Sergeant Ed. "And the answer has to be a rather unsatisfying one: yes and no. Yes, the Dennis guys called in and said they had seen the creature at precisely the location reported by Walt Mullen. No, the Harwich guys who arrived at exactly the same location seconds later called their dispatcher and said they had seen nothing.

"I was on duty that night with the scanner on, and I recall hearing the Dennis car's transmission. 'Yeah, it's here all right, big grey bleepin thing eating grass, preliminary ID hippopotamus. It smells terrible but other than that it doesn't seem to be involved in any public nuisance or misdemeanor.' Then there was a transmission from the Dennis dispatcher that I couldn't hear. 'No, we didn't see any, but then again we didn't get that close. Judging by the way it's munching vegetation, there's probably a big pile somewhere. If we see any should we make the collar?' More radio noise. 'Understood but it's hard to tell if it's in Dennis or Harwich. Tommy thinks it's right on the town line.' More noise. 'Roger - will maintain surveillance.' "

Sergeant Ed took a sip of his coffee. "Then the Harwich guys show up, and I could hear them too on the scanner. 'No, nothing out here that we can see ... we put the searchlight on, and Donny's checking in the woods with his flashlight. He hunts and claims he can find tracks. You gotta figure if he can follow a rabbit or a woodchuck that a hippopotamus would be pretty easy for him, but, hey, I don't know nothin' about it. I dig quahogs. He's the jungle expert.' "

"At that point the Harwich dispatcher must have asked if his guy could see the Dennis patrol car. 'Yeah, it's pulled over about a hundred feet from us,'" replies Donny's partner. Squelch noise, then 'Really? I thought they were on some kind of traffic job. I can't believe they said they saw this thing ... seems like a waste of taxpayers' money, but we'll keep looking.' "

Jerry made a circular rubbing motion in the vicinity of his right temple. "Uh ... if the Dennis cops could see it, and the Harwich guys couldn't, why didn't the Harwich cops just ask the Dennis cops where the thing was?" he asked.

"They couldn't," explained Sergeant Ed. "The Dennis PD had really whooped the Harwich PD at the 4th of July softball game that year. It was a matter of official pride. As long as the Harwich guys couldn't see the hippo, it wasn't there, even - or, to be more adverbially accurate, *especially* - if the Dennis cops could see it."

Jerry slowly shook his head in evident disbelief. "This is really weird, Sarge. I wouldn't know what to make of any of this."

"Exactly," said Sergeant Ed. "But it gets weirder.

"By then other drivers had started calling 911. 'Jeez, I seen this big thing like a whatdoyoucallit hippopotamus off the side of the Mid-Cape,' one guy says, " 'and I swear I ain't had a drink in two days. What the hell's going on?' Then a woman calls. 'I see a couple squad cars pulled over near the rest area there on 6. Don't they have anything better to do? Criminals all over the place and these clowns are sucking down Diet Cokes and listening to the Red Sox? Is this what we're paying taxes for?' And so forth and so on. It went on until after midnight. Some people saw the hippo, some didn't. Reality became a dervish dance in quantum space. Maybe it wasn't a hippopotamus but Schodinger's paradoxical cat. Somewhere in the Continuum there was the sound of entangled laughter blended with the quacking of charmed quarks, the belching of bisons and bosons and wild Bohrs, the wavy vibrations in concert pitch of stringlike entities subsisting on low-proton diets ... "

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Jerry nodded slowly and took a bite of marble cruller. "Sarge, I gotta be honest. I didn't understand a goddam thing you just said there after 'midnight'."

Sergeant Ed chuckled in a kindly-old-uncle fashion. "Of course you didn't, young Jerry. You haven't been on the force long enough. Oh, Pam - check, please!"

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