

The Traveler

By Chris Berke

The intriguing thing about living in a modern technological revolution is that all of humanity was able to witness the Event in real time. To this day it astounds me that we're capable of live-streaming something so gigantic, and so pivotal for our species, from every angle. Camera equipped drones from all corners of the globe flocked to provide a non-stop, 24-hour feed to the masses. Citizens near Times Square forwent their daily commute in favor of surrounding the hundred-foot screens, religious factions of all denominations prayed for divine answers, and students (like myself at the time) found it overwhelmingly difficult to absorb the teachings of their professors. Suddenly new questions replaced old questions. Where is it from? Why is it here? What can we learn? And even though mankind can revisit the footage over and over again, I fear that we as humans will never be able to comprehend the Traveler's true purpose.

With such a grand occurrence witnessed by elite journalists the world over, I was astonished when Time Magazine contracted me to write this exposé. A compliment no matter how daunting the task. The job description was clear-cut: Compile dates, names, and standout occurrences into a rational narrative. Something condensed and leisurely to put society at ease. Easier said than done, mind you. But even though I spent months scouring the footage and successfully assembling a comprehensive timeline, I never could discern a motive of any reliable nature. I'll just have to let the story speak for itself.

From what I can hypothesize, the Traveler, as we have come to name it, descended from the cosmos sometime in September 2032 and claimed its stake at the center of a field in who-knows-where South Dakota (Actually it was between Clark and De Smet). He, she, or it was humanoid in shape, yet lacked any defining organs of a male or female. It was impossibly tall, sixteen or seventeen feet, had Herculean musculature, and blindingly white... I'll say skin. On what we would consider a face were no imprinted features of any life form discovered on Earth. An ultimately smooth void inhabited the absence of eyes, nose, mouth, and expression. However, as you will read, that despite lacking these perceived evolutionary advantages, the Traveler had undoubtedly transcended any need for them.

September 15th of 2032 marked mankind's first recorded encounter with the Traveler. It was, for lack of a better phrase, embarrassing yet colorful. Three rural Dakotans had noticed a faint glow in the distance after turning down a back road following a night of festive drinking. Curiosity got the best of them and they decided to inspect. The old pickup truck took a small path through some harvest-ready corn and eventually pulled into a clearing. That's where this encounter begins. The recording came from a live, three-minute social media stream that dictates as follows:

A shaky-hand smartphone captures a ghostly pale goliath squatting in the clearing of corn. It was mysteriously whisking away the crop (with the wave of a single hand) to create room for a 30 meter by 30 meter platform. (Researchers would later come to find that the Traveler had created a flawlessly smooth, flawlessly tempered glass from the ground below.) We then hear one of the three men from outside the frame shout, "Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?" The gigantic being ignores the message to complete its excavation, which causes friction in the man's blood-alcohol level. The cameraman swivels to one of the men lowering the truck's tailgate to retrieve a shotgun. When the focus returns to the Traveler, one can spot the third man throwing (presumably) a beer can at the muscular back of the creature. It pauses, stands fully erect, and rotates its body to face the culprit. Heavy breathing picks up from behind the camera while plenty of expletives

are picked up over the microphone. The tosser of the can begins to say, “That’s right, I’m talking to—” but starts levitating and disappears from view. The man with the shotgun pumps the fore-end and proceeds to take aim. I assure you what happened next was not a product of poor camera framing or lighting. At the end of the barrel, the expected explosion of light from gunpowder exits, freezes in midair, and is reversed back into the chest of the man who pulled the trigger. Immediately following, the camera fell to the ground and went black. None of the men were ever seen again.

It only took three hours after the initial contact video was posted for the United States Army to make an appearance. Before the sun could shed its first light, a massive infantry migrated to that Midwestern field and surrounded the stage made of glass that the Traveler stood upon. A four-star general by the name of Richard Greely addressed the alien from a PA system safely tucked behind a makeshift bulwark. The first thing Greely announced (as if a panel of pulp science fiction enthusiasts hastily gave the briefing) was, “We come in peace.” Above, four Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning IV jets screamed through the air in a diamond formation. The Traveler remained unphased. “By issue of the United States Government and, um...” a media-drone swooped in and exposed the General’s apprehension with crystal clarity, “...planet Earth, we inquire the purpose of your visit.” Still no answer. In fact, not even a shift in weight of the Traveler’s massive legs.

Hours went by (and you can look up the hilarious transcripts yourself) while General Greely barked requests at the Traveler to no avail. The F-35 jets continued to circle in formation while tanks, Humvees, and a plethora of other military vehicles rearranged themselves for optimal advantage. From a media-drone’s-eye-view, black SUV’s came and went with manilla folders like ants delivering leaves to the colony and retreating to acquire more. Random frequencies were played through the PA system, symbols from ancient languages and universal equations were displayed on massive screens, and even the playlist from Voyager’s Golden Record was presented to the Traveler without so much as a blink. (Clearly *blink* is an expression as the Traveler did not have eyes in any form that we could understand.)

Eventually the sun reached high noon and the U.S. Military could not shove any more war machines into the crowded field. The F-35s circled back for what must have been the thirtieth flyby. Only this time there was something different about the pass. From what was later revealed to be a sharp glare from the glass terrace below, the right-flanking jet mistook the blinding light as an aggression from the Traveler and dove straight down to attack the culprit. The rogue Lightning IV barrel-rolled with its Gatling gun armed and opened fire on the white giant. Instantaneously, the Traveler’s left hand shot upwards and refracted the 25 mm bullets back towards their source. Metal shrapnel ate through the entire F-35 body like termites until what survived was a plane-shaped husk.

As the shell of the jet freefell towards the Traveler, something happened that had never been witnessed by human eyes prior. The F-35 had already reached terminal velocity so the Traveler’s next moves could only be described by rewinding the video feed and proceeding frame-by-frame. In one frame the Traveler clenched its fist. In the next the jet had disappeared completely. Then it was clear by some reflection of the sun that the plane had somehow turned into glass (just as the land below the Traveler’s feet). Finally, the Traveler’s arm returned to its side and all that reached the ground was a whisper of fine dust. Nothing remained of the Lightning IV or its pilot.

What followed was a mistake that mankind has made time and time again throughout the centuries. General Greely dropped the PA’s handheld and picked up a satellite phone rushed to him by a Private. The general spoke into it with fury and nodded until whoever was on the other side produced a grin on Greely’s face. He then tossed the phone back to the private, who hastily retreated back to the bunker, and retrieved the handheld microphone. A few official orders later and every tank, gun, and missile launcher in the area raised to

take aim at the Traveler's chest. Greely, with his hand raised as an answer to his opponent's, clenched his fist and the battalion unleashed hell on the extraterrestrial.

After roughly 30 seconds of assault, the general called a ceasefire and waited for the smoke to clear. At first it appeared the Traveler had gone, that something replaced him, but it was uncertain what that something might be. In another 30 seconds it was clear nothing replaced the Traveler at all, only surrounded it. Every shard of every projectile that had been sent towards the white titan was hovering around it in glass form. The sphere shimmered for a few silent moments and eventually evaporated away in an orb of dust. Finally, after yet another 30 seconds, the Traveler stretched its arms out as wide as they would go, transformed every object of war (including the humans) into glass, curled its fingers back in, and carpeted the field with a new layer of topsoil. The retaliation was swift, silent, and, (what we all hope anyway) painless.

Months passed after more than a thousand men and women were reduced to soot. Not a soul on this planet dared come into conflict with the Traveler from then on. Sure scientists, world government officials, and foolish tourists would stop by from time-to-time to gawk, but the field remained barren and the titan remained still. The world settled back into its business just as it had before September 15, 2032. The Traveler became less of an intruder and more of a dark truth nestled in the back of everyone's minds; right between racism and the changing climate. In fact, most of Earth's population (myself included) shoehorned the Traveler into their daily routines. We would make breakfast, read emails, then casually check in on the unmoving intruder. For a while, memes, documentaries, articles, and large betting pools circulated around the Traveler, but the topic grew cool on a back burner.

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Grass died, winds blew, snow fell, winter thawed, storms thundered, and, just as the first wildflowers of spring teased their colors, the world seized once again. On May 3rd, 2033, the Traveler moved. A white van emerged from the overgrown field and pulled up to the glass platform. Out stepped a blue-robed man. Behind him were four other men in matching blue uniforms. They all paused at the edge of the platform, spoke to each other in a huddle, and then the robed one stepped onto the glass. Immediately, the Traveler turned to face him.

A media-drone dove to film the new interloper as he dropped his blue robe to his feet. The man's identity was suddenly revealed as world heavyweight boxing champion Sergio Popov. With 12 ounce gloves already taped tight around his fists, Popov was initiating possibly the most bizarre, yet fearless, publicity stunts of all time.

The boxer took one step forward and the Traveler mirrored him. Then Popov took another step and so did the Traveler. Step after step they approached each other, but one of them was making an additional movement. Just as astounding and frightening as the glass-to-dust ability, the Traveler could also change its size. So much so that when the boxer and the white giant reached each other, they were equal in height. Toe-to-toe the two paused. A drone caught Popov swallowing anxiously, glancing back at his team, and then raising his fists.

Like everyone else, I remember this bout like it happened earlier today. Popov took his stance, bounced on the balls of his feet, and circled his opponent just as calculatingly as he would in the ring. Meanwhile, the Traveler swiveled on the inside (instinctively keeping square with the boxer). After a few fakes, Popov finally went for the Traveler's head with a lightning-fast jab. A direct hit! I could hear cheers emanating from all over my apartment complex as Popov instantly catapulted to global icon status. There was another jab, then a cross, then a hook, then a few more jabs and soon the entire world was screaming the boxer's name.

However, the celebration was short lived. Not only did the power of Popov's fists have zero effect on the Traveler, but after four more strikes the cosmic being had somehow deciphered every movement the champion had ever perfected. The Traveler squared up similarly to Popov and began dodging. Jab, miss, hook, miss, uppercut, miss, cross, miss...no further strikes came unexpected. Our boxer would not land another punch in this iconic Earth v. Traveler matchup.

Mankind realized the heartbreaking truth once the Traveler began counter-punching. So did Sergio Popov. A jab triple the speed of the world-class athlete's met Popov's temple. The boxer shook off the stunning pain and tossed another combination. Each strike was expertly and precisely sidestepped and was met with blows far stronger than any human could deliver. Seconds later, Popov was down. Viewers (myself included) were on the edge of their seats wondering if he, too, would go through the glass-to-dust transformation.

But nothing of the sort happened.

Arms still raised, the Traveler patiently waited for the human to stand back up. Popov obliged, went another twenty seconds, and was promptly returned to his hands and knees. He could take no more. Realizing this, the Traveler lowered its own fists and waited calmly for the boxer to return to his feet. It was minutes before Popov could find his breath. Once he did, he stood up to face his opponent through bloodied brows and, just as in any professional match, he reached a glove out in admiration. Briefly, the Traveler stood as frozen as it had since arrival. Then it unexpectedly reached its own hand out to benevolently touch the glove. The bedraggled boxer nodded, left the glass arena with head held high, and stepped off the most famous man in the world.

However, Sergio Popov's success in not being reduced to dust came as a double-edged sword. It didn't take long for fighters from all around the world to travel to South Dakota so they could try their hand in defeating the Traveler in combat. Masters of every discipline turned up in their formal outfits. Jiu-Jitsu, wrestling, Judo, kickboxing, and even Taekwondo authorities attempted to land that one deadly strike on the alien that would render it defeated. There was no such luck. Just as with boxing, the Traveler mastered every form of martial arts within seconds of studying its opponents. One-by-one they came, and one-by-one they left with tails between their legs.

Later that summer, mid-July to be precise, a Norwegian philosopher by the name of Lukas Bjelland surmised that perhaps the Traveler had not journeyed to Earth seeking that of a physical equal, but more of a psychological one. In an interview Bjelland went on to mention that "a being of such insurmountable power has no need or desire for battle, yet may still yearn to be vindicated intellectually." Religious leaders boldly criticized the theories of Bjelland and publicly chastised him as a heretic. They established there was no possible way to understand the Traveler's intent since it was a "godlike" being sent from the heavens to extricate humanity. Naturally, the news media ran with the latter of the two voices on grounds that it was more controversial and, frankly, increased ratings. I'll note that the media also failed to mention Bjelland's final statement on the matter (one I found most intriguing): that perhaps the Grandmaster from space merely "came here to lose".

And speaking of Grandmasters... In the wake of Lukas Bjelland's controversial theorem, top-tiered chess players began the pilgrimage to South Dakota to try their hand at besting the Traveler in a battle of wits. The most notable was French Grandmaster Jeanne Laurent. She was the first to arrive and had the greatest statistical likelihood of success. She brought with her two folding chairs, a table, and a professional weighted chess set. As before, the Traveler turned to face her once she set foot on the glass, approached as she got closer, and shrunk down to match her size. Only when Laurent took her seat and extended an arm as an invitation to join did the Traveler effortlessly squat onto the chair.

Jeanne Laurent, including her global audience, assumed the Traveler had never seen nor played anything remotely similar to chess. One-by-one she meticulously placed the black pieces on the far side of the board; followed by the white on her side. Then she briefly paused to see if the Traveler would make a motion. It didn't. Next, with one flat hand raised to her opponent in the "stop" position, Laurent grabbed a piece, mimicked its movements, then returned the piece to its home.

Laurent emulated all fifteen piece's movements until she finally grabbed the king. In contrast to the Queen, she moved it only one space in each direction, then held it up at eye level. The Traveler remained motionless. "This is the endgame," she said aloud, "the one piece you are simultaneously protecting while also trying to kill your opponent's." To drive the point home, she placed the wooden king back down at the center of the board and, with her index finger, flicked it over. "Got it?"

Once all the pieces were back in their starting positions, Laurent (being the white side) went first. She moved a pawn forward one space and waited. The Traveler waited, too. Nearly ten minutes passed. Laurent was considering packing up when her opponent methodically reached over, grabbed a knight, and placed it in front of the wall of black pawns. The Grandmaster grinned.

Going forward the Traveler's pause between turns reduced significantly. From ten minutes to five minutes to one minute to nearly instantaneous counter-moves, Laurent went from being the shoo-in to on the run. Pieces were traded, queens were pulled out early, and strategies blossomed. Grandmasters study this monumental game even to this day. Some say that the start of Laurent's downfall was a brief moment of arrogance when the Traveler used its king offensively; that she had disregarded it as an amateur mistake. Others say she played the perfect game and that the Traveler set her up ten moves prior using a combination that had never been seen in chess before. Either way, Jeanne Laurent accepted her loss when her opponent slid a black rook to B9 and returned its hands to its lap. She momentarily stared at the board and then, with a smirk, flicked the white king over.

For the remainder of that summer the Traveler became more of a carnival attraction and less of a cosmic entity. Assuming that the titan was harmless if left unprovoked, countless professionals and hobbyists stood in line to try their hand at outsmarting the being. When classic chess grew hopeless, speed chess came in. Then it was Checkers, Shogi, Stratego, Mahjong, Othello, and even Fencing. Any challenge that could be considered "intellectual" by the masses made its way onto that glass stage. Unfortunately they all came, they all taught, and they all lost.



Nearly a decade passed and forgotten was the time the Traveler turned an entire battalion into dust. Forgotten was the time it outranked our greatest martial artists in less than a three-minute round. And forgotten were the feeble attempts at besting the transient being in contests of mental strategy. Time moved on. *We* moved on. The field that housed the stage of glass moved on as well, regrowing lush wild grasses, shrubs, and flowers. Occasionally a media-drone would catch a rodent scurrying across the platform, or a bird flying over, but the Traveler prevailed; petrified in its own quandary of space and time.

It wasn't until August 23rd, 2041 that someone piqued the Traveler's interest for the final time. I had just handed in my thesis on *Sentient Life and its Motivations* (which went onto be published!) when I caught a live feed over lunch at the student union. At first we all thought a media-drone was on the fritz, recording a tuft of tall wild grass shuffling in the wind, when a young girl (now famously recognized as Mika Drew) popped out

into the clearing and climbed up onto the glass. She was carrying a colorful box under her arm. The Traveler promptly took notice, approached her, and matched her small size.

Every single person in my vicinity dropped their utensils and hurried over to the screens displaying the feed. “Turn it up!” someone yelled. I had just reached the huddle of babbling students and staff in time to watch five-year-old Mika sit cross-legged on the glass. She had already dumped the box out onto the glass and was arranging its contents. The Traveler joined her.

Mika held out four bulbous plastic items (one red, one blue, one green, and one purple) for the Traveler to choose from, but it sat motionless. The girl grew impatient after less than a minute of waiting and picked her own color, green, and placed it on a sheet of paper between them. Then she lifted the remaining three baubles to the cross-legged humanoid opposite her and it gently selected purple. “Good choice,” the media-drone picked up the girl saying, “now hold on.” She began organizing the rest of the small, yellow pieces across the paper and started pointing profusely at different images.

“Is this some kind of toy?” I asked a fellow nearby student that had her phone out. “You’ve never played this?” she scoffed, “It’s called Cootie Bug.” I shrugged while reaching into my own pocket so I could look up this foreign-to-me game. *Rules to Cootie Bug* I typed into the search field and then clicked on the first result. In short, the game consists of assembling one’s own “Cootie Bug” by rolling dice numbers equal to a corresponding body part. There is one body, one head, two antennae, two eyes, one tongue, and six legs. Rolling a one matches to the body, which is the first piece needed to continue. Next the player needs to roll a two for the head. Once the player has those initial two parts, the rest of the pieces are fair game. The winner is the first to complete their Cootie Bug.

The young girl rolled to see who would go first, a four, then handed over the die, signalling the Traveler to do the same. Six. “Dammit!” a guy in my huddle shouted. Some chuckled but most of us kept our gaze quietly on the screen. The girl handed over the die and then pointed again at the sheet between them that contained the legend and the limbs. After a moment’s pause, the Traveler let the die fall from its hand and it landed with a three up. “No good,” the young girl iterated, scooped the die back up for herself, tossed it between them, and leaned over to read the results: one.

A surprising murmur of encouragement came from the jumble of lunch goers around me. Everyone began leaning into the game as if Cootie Bug was a craps table in Las Vegas. With green Cootie torso in hand, the girl rolled for the head: three. A wave of groans washed around me as she handed the die back to the Traveler. The pale opponent dropped the die again, landed a one, then collected its purple Cootie torso. Then it rolled again, a two this time, and seized the Cootie’s head. Then again it rolled another two. Turn over. And with that, planet Earth had its first fair shot.

Back and forth Mika and the Traveler went, dropping dice and assembling their Cootie Bugs. At one point the Traveler had all six legs, but no eyes, tongue, or antennae, while the girl had the exact opposite plus one leg. She would roll a six to claim an additional leg then the Traveler would roll another two which forced a turnover. The energy in the student union became electrified! Casual viewers became screaming, booing, and groaning fans. Some were holding wads of money in the air as betting fuel. Even I couldn’t help but join in on the excitement with a few dollars of my own!

Who knew what would follow was an inconceivable stroke of cosmic luck.

The Traveler had amassed six legs, two eyes, and two antennae, but was still missing a tongue. Mika had only three legs remaining. It was the Traveler’s turn and it had blown its roll on yet another two. The girl playfully picked up the die and effortlessly dropped a six. The student union released an immense ovation! She plugged a hole with a yellow plastic limb and rolled again: another six. Every single one of us lost our minds

dancing around until Mika had the fifth leg inserted and readied herself for one final roll. Our group shushed each other until the union fell silent. Wide-eyed, we watched the young girl sift the die around in her palm, blow on it with missing-toothed smile, and release the white cube onto the smooth glass surface...

A six.

The ground beneath me shook with the celebration of eight billion humans jumping up and down simultaneously. The girl who had scoffed at me earlier wrapped her arms around me in a warm embrace while I stood frozen in disbelief. Students, faculty, and strangers were hugging, cheering, and calling loved ones to tell them...tell them what, exactly?

“Quiet!” someone shouted, “Something’s happening!” We all paused and gazed at what followed on the screen without so much as a breath. As Mika trotted her completed Cootie Bug around in a circle, the Traveler returned to full-form (as we have come to reference it), all seventeen feet of it. That was enough to pull the five-year-old’s attention away. She rose from her knees with her mouth open in amazement. The ethereal titan stood there for a few moments in a slightly new position. Instead of impeccable straight up and down posture, the Traveler’s head tilted forward towards the girl and cocked slightly to one side, as if it was admiring her...*communicating* with her. Shortly after, the girl chuckled and slung her arms around the giant’s leg with the affection a child gives to a missed parent. Once she let go, the Traveler gently placed its massive hand on top of her fragile head, nodded, then began its ascent.

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Eight years, eleven months, and eight days. That’s how long the Traveler graced, or cursed, the surface of our planet. If three drunk Midwesterners had never discovered the giant humanoid poised on a platform of glass in the middle of nowhere, it may very well still be standing there to this day. Only the platform remains there now and there’s a new figure that stands upon it. Just as unmoving as its predecessor, a glass statue of Mika Drew occupies the barren field in remembrance of that fateful day.

Humanity changed after the Traveler. Suddenly understanding that we were no longer alone in the universe burdened us with unstudiable existential questions for the rest of our lives. Are we the first? What’s special about Earth? Will there be more? The answers are just as endless as the queries. None of us can presume why this transcendent being journeyed the cosmos to visit our small planet at the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy. Maybe the white giant came to survey our planet’s defenses so it could return for our resources. Maybe, as Lukas Bjelland had theorized, the featureless titan was in search of a competition at which it could be bested. Or maybe—just maybe—the Traveler’s sole purpose was to play the world’s most extraordinary game of Cootie Bug with a young South Dakota girl named Mika Drew.

Prove me wrong.