# *The Supersonic Phallus*

a novel

Steven Key Meyers

## 1.

THE HEAVENS OPENED up just after I got to Friedrich's that morning.

All was fine as I parked in the alleyway in back and carried my burden indoors, past the presses already thundering with that evening's interior pages, past the composing room and into the break room. There I deposited my wife's goodies—four dozen doughnuts, four dozen cookies—next to the coffee cistern, and went on into the newsroom in time to witness, through the former department store's expanses of plate glass, an explosive downpour.

The street, dusty one moment, the next was *awash,* blurred by the raindrops machine-gunning it. It emptied instantly. A man slouching across burst into a sprint. A woman pushed, pushed, pushed her baby carriage, losing a shoe behind her. Two men rapt in conversation crouched, then ran in opposite directions. Even given the rarity of summer rainstorms in western Colorado, the panicky response surprised me.

Many crowded onto the mosaic floor that spelled out *Friedrich's* at our recessed, bronze-doored entry. In the Great Depression the department store closed and the Sinai, Colorado *Sentinel* moved in; hence our spacious quarters. It was *Sentinel* practice for Tommy, our copy boy, to Scotch-tape to the windows the

wire-service bulletins that came chattering over the teletypes all day (after we reporters got the meat out of them first, of course). Townspeople were accustomed to step over and read the latest without having to fork over a nickel, but today there was a real crowd.

(Did it help or hurt in selling papers? The debate went back and forth, but it was the way the Senator had always done it.)

I broke off from watching outdoors to call, "OK, people, who wants cookies and doughnuts?"

That changed everybody's focus. I stepped back as colleagues happily poured past.

I should explain that the Government had finally lifted its wartime sugar rationing only a few weeks earlier; America's sweet tooth hadn't rotted in years. At first sugar vanished from the markets—couldn't be had for love or money or ration coupons—but now it was finally available. Katharine snagged enough to spend Friday happily frying doughnuts and baking chocolate-chip cookies.

"Delicious!" everybody said. "Give our thanks to Katharine!"

Grabbing a glazed for myself, I poured a cup of coffee, sat down at my desk and munched. As my colleague Dean, whose desk faced mine, sat down with a couple of cookies, I looked past him and asked, "Why the crowd? Something happen?"

"Flying saucers," he said.

"*What* flying saucers?"

"The ones swarming last night?"

"*What* ones swarming last night?"

Of course I knew about the sensational sighting ten days earlier, on June 24: One Kenneth Arnold, piloting

his plane past Mt. Rainier, reported seeing *nine saucers* flying at *1,200 m.p.h.* The *Sentinel* headline was

**FLYING DISKS OVER CASCADES**
***WHIZZING 'PIE-PLATE' REPORT GETS ARMY SKEPTICISM***

But the press accounts, however sensational, were mostly a one-day wonder.

"*Dozens,*" Dean told me. "In 30-odd states, *swarming.*"

"For real?"

"Should read the wires, Sam."

I did. Went out front and sidled into the crowd sheltering from the drumming, dusty-smelling rain to read the Associated Press and United Press dispatches.

The gist was as Dean said, that last night—the 4th of July!—more than *800 people* around the country called the police, called radio stations, called newspapers, jamming switchboards to report that they saw *flying saucers*—discs or spheres glowing red or green, maneuvering either slowly or very, very fast, silent or sounding like thunder. The callers, at pains to describe themselves as solid citizens, included ministers and airline pilots.

Among the reports was a local one, from Upchurch, twenty miles east of Sinai on the slopes of Two-Mile Mesa, written up for the police blotter and dispatched to the A.P. by our colleague Elbert: Mrs. Jesse Upchurch, widow, called the Mesa County Sheriff's Department after seeing an *orb* or *rocket* shoot overhead after sunset.

After the first flying-saucer report Elbert, a fighter pilot in the war, had told us about "foo fighters," strange orbs that would accompany squadrons for hundreds of miles before zooming off at astonishing speeds. "They were there pretty often," he said. "We just ignored them. What else could we do?"

As I skimmed the stories of flying saucers seen over Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, streaking through the skies of Michigan, Idaho and California, overtaking a DC–6 airliner in Oregon, I listened to the anxious chatter.

"Bad feeling it's the Russians," one man said.

"Better Russians than Martians?" a woman ventured.

"Reds or Martians, what's the difference?" scoffed another.

Abruptly the rain stopped and its cold drafts ceased. I turned around to watch our little downtown—lampposts festooned with soaked and dripping *Rodeo Days* banners—pull itself together as the sun re-exerted its summertime strength. For a minute everything was fresh, crystalline, but being essentially desert the ground would absorb the rain in a trice. The big puddle at our corner of Second and Main would last all day, though, the drains forever clogged.

Then the town's most amazing vehicle plowed through it: the custom-built, one-of-a-kind, cream-colored, wood-sided Cadillac pickup truck that belonged to Sinai's richest citizen, Ernie Wacker, the Uranium King.

Ernie (he insisted that everybody call him Ernie) had taken delivery just a few weeks earlier—Detroit only now making cars again after its wartime

conversion to tanks and artillery—and already we'd featured a picture of it sitting alongside his gift to his wife: a custom-built, wood-sided Cadillac station wagon in Cherokee red. He'd also bought a Cessna 140 plane and a Bell 47 whirly-bird, and learned how to fly them, too. As he went along now some cheered Sinai's biggest employer.

As I opened the door to go back inside, a lady asked, "Young man, where can I place a classified ad?"

Pointing her to the counter at the side, I walked through the swinging railing on to the break room, in time to snatch the last cookie from under Tommy's disappointed but well-stuffed gaze. Sitting down in my green-lacquered plywood swivel chair (everybody had one), I turned to face my bleached-oak Mission desk (ditto) and addressed Dean.

"OK: flying saucers. What do you think?"

"I don't," he said. "Sorry, I've got a party to write up. Great cookies, by the way."

"I'll tell Katharine."

While I had city and police beats, poor Dean was stuck as the *Sentinel*'s Society Editor. We started at the same time, just five weeks earlier, and I don't know how I was so lucky and he so unlucky. At my interview I told Wilt Pullman—the *Sentinel*'s owner, editor and publisher—that I wanted either *his* job or a police beat. Dean told me (I asked) that at his interview Wilt mentioned Society Editor as being open, and he said that sounded fine as a start.

Sinai *society,* you might wittily inquire? But the Society Editor had all he (until Dean, it had always been *she)* could do in writing up the dinner parties, bridge parties, canasta parties, sewing circles, book

club, lodge and garden club meetings that took place in Sinai or its satellites Palisade, Fruita and Clifton, in numerous daily or twice-weekly columns, getting the names and spelling them right. He was conscientious, too, and suffered when he got things wrong. Oh, his pain at placing Mrs. Horace Hedghill at Mrs. Thomas Tasaway's table, when everybody knew they weren't speaking!

Sat there slurping my coffee and picking up cookie crumbs with the wetted tip of a finger as Dean, glancing at his notes, typed steadily. I always got a slow start Saturdays.

The thing about Dean was that he was so damn good-looking—the handsomest man I ever saw. What a face! The women in the office, from 73-year-old Mrs. Gresham in classifieds to 18-year-old Birdy at the switchboard, made fools of themselves every day greeting Dean, consulting Dean, asking Dean how he was doing, walking past Dean as many times as they could contrive. Miss Laura Scott, a willowy beauty our age, one of our two women typesetters, was thought to have the inside track, but to my eye Dean appeared unaware of her. He was equally nice to everybody.

I was 24, Dean no more than a year older. We'd been classmates on the G.I. Bill at the University of Colorado's School of Journalism, both of us mentored by the great Gayle Waldrop, who wrote the book on editorial writing. But we'd hardly known each other before Fate put us at facing desks. I did know that Dean had a hard war, with wounds that required a long convalescence at Fitzsimmons in Denver.

Frankly I found his good looks—though of course not his fault—off-putting. What with being a married

man with a toddler son and pregnant wife, I felt queasy to perceive another guy as being so attractive. He was fair, big-eyed, his face sculpted into fascinating declivities (if sometimes bearing the mien of someone who's killed too many people), and tall, lithe, well set up besides. The kind of bachelor who attracts every eye.

And there he sat, right in front of me, chin cleft, cheekbones tented, lips always wet—even his strong nose redeemed the usual clay of the human face. In science fiction (I'm a big fan of Frederick Pohl, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein) space aliens are green or red with snakelike limbs and elongated heads, but secretly I think my fellow humans about as grotesque (just *look* at them sometime!). Dean was the exception. To look at him was to want to keep on looking.

Not my fault that, sitting where I did, he might sometimes have thought I was staring. Once he looked up and winked at me! Now he dialed to ask a hostess for additional details. He was good with people—warmly communicated his interest in them and their parties of whatever sort.

OK, so flying saucers. Reached to my pipe stand and filled my favorite meerschaum: What did *I* think?

Not much. To me it was obviously delusional, an eruption of mass hysteria.

And I thought the cause pretty obvious.

I was on Guam, a U.S. Navy SeaBee just turned 22, awaiting my role in the upcoming invasion of the Japanese home islands that everybody knew would kill most of us—the official prediction was up to *1,000,000* casualties—when news came of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The happiest moment of my life!

Until one of the Guamian women in my laundry said, "What about the women and children?"

The war ended without an invasion, but its end brought joys not unmixed. Sure, the boys came home—but they were changed, different, roughened, restless. Women lost the jobs they'd been doing. With Daddy home, families had to get reacquainted. It was a good time to be young and starting a career, but the war's atomic finish—those blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not to mention the Trinity test in New Mexico—unsettled everybody.

Someone, I forget who, had theorized that radio broadcasts of *Fibber McGee and Molly* radiating out from planet Earth at the speed of light would already have alerted any fellow denizens of the galaxy to our presence. Put that way, the crash whenever McGee opened the door to his overstuffed closet that was so funny *every time* was a harbinger of doom. But if *Fibber* hadn't done the trick, surely those atomic explosions had.

So hysteria *(hmm,* made manifest on fireworks day?), or space aliens, or. . . *Russians?* Scary to think they'd be sending aircraft so much faster than ours into our skies but, though I knew Igor Sikorsky invented the helicopter in the U.S.S.R., I didn't really associate it with advanced aviation. Yet everybody knew that our erstwhile ally was now an enemy who desperately wanted her own Bomb.

"Dean, what do you think, *really?"*

He looked up from a seating chart some lady who wanted her name in the paper had kindly brought by.

"About—?"

"Flying saucers! Summertime craze like strawberry ice cream, or—"

His eyes (blue) flashed, his hand brushed back his hair (golden).

"'*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,*'" he quoted. "One night in Belgium during the war we saw flames arcing overhead impossibly fast."

"Flying saucer?"

"Figured it was a V–2 rocket headed for London."

"Wow!" I could see it in my mind's eye.

Even as my actual eyes caught sight of Ernie Wacker's Cadillac pickup (now two-tone cream and red mud) parking beside the fire hydrant out front, and the diminutive millionaire himself getting out to read the wire-service reports, his Australian bush hat pushed back on his high forehead, hands on blue-jeaned hips as if he were the fastest draw in the West.

I'm sure I wasn't alone in finding Ernie personally rather repellent. He was a bantam who knew he was better than you. Multimillions will do that. But of course more people worked for him than for the railroad, hospital and sugar-beet mill combined.

He came indoors and—one of these little guys with big voices—boomed, "Wilt in? Or did the Martians get him? Or maybe a moose?"

"Haven't got him yet, Ernie," I called over as all five-feet-five of him stumped on cowboy boots towards Wilt's office on the Second Street side. (Wilt had finally shot his moose in Montana the previous autumn.)

Wilt opened the door he always kept shut ("Not like in the Senator's day," my colleagues carped) and mildly called, "What's the commotion? Hello, Ernie."

"Wilt, you see all this mess about *flying saucers?"* Ernie asked with a nod to the front doors that almost made his hat fall off.

"Be a big story in today's paper."

"I'm here to clear up the mystery for you."

"Oh?"

Everybody was paying attention.

"It's the Russians!" he shouted. "They've built these things faster than anything we have and they're sending 'em here to get the one thing they *haven't* got, which is the atomic bomb! Here to sniff around my mine and mill—"

Noticing that no work was being done, Wilt conducted him into his office and closed the door. That muffled their voices, but didn't stop Ernie from yelling.

"What's he going on about, I wonder?" I asked Dean.

"Well, look," he answered, "these flying saucers are probably figments of people's imagination, right?"

"Right!"

"But what if they're not? What if any of these witnesses—a lot of them the sort we're inclined to trust—actually saw what they say they saw? Then it's a *very* big deal. If it's the Russians, *huge*. But if these things come from outer space it's *everything*. Bigger than Jesus, Sam. I mean, are we already going about our daily business at the sufferance of alien overlords? I don't happen to think so, but you see the stakes."

This speech let me look at him, enjoy the animation of those comely features, as I thought, *How* can anyone *be* so damn good-looking?

Wilt's door opened and Wilt escorted the Uranium King halfway to the front doors, Ernie booming, "And

thing? Just hush it up if they can, when what they *should* do is build more Bombs, 'cause the only thing Russia respects is *power.*

"Tell you, too, if it's Martians or whatever, then they're here *because* of the Bomb, and building more's all we can do, 'cause I don't care how *green* they may be, nuclear fission will blow 'em to smithereens same as a person. Know your Bible, Wilt? 'We have no might against this great force that cometh against us.' But that was before the Bomb!"

"Thanks, Ernie, thanks very much. Have a nice day now."

Ernie marched out—cowboy boots clomping—got in his truck, started it with a bass tunefulness lovely to hear and, plunging once more through the puddle, drove off.

The newsroom was quiet for a moment, as when a storm's passed, before typing and the murmurs of telephone conversations and other sounds incidental to producing a newspaper resumed.

From his doorway Wilt called, "Dean, Sam, see you a moment?"

*The Supersonic Phallus*



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