

## Feeling Flat

I knew he'd been talking rubbish. Yes, rubbish – but it still disturbed me. It wasn't a joke, either. He meant it. It was hardly an original idea but one nobody, surely *nobody*, could believe. He said – and he actually *meant* it – he said the earth was flat.

I'd smiled at first, thinking it was a joke. Then I laughed because it wasn't. I mean, I made a joke myself but he didn't laugh. In fact, he scowled a bit. Said it was a typical reaction, he was most disappointed.

I offered a load of objections. Hey, I watch *The Sky At Night!* They'd have none of it on there. Patrick Moore may have left us but his legacy lives on. We got a little heated, I guess. There were eyes looking in our direction. Half the pub could hear. I thought, okay, flat or round – it's raining outside, let's stay for another beer. Changed the subject to politics, far less vexatious.

But they stuck with me, his ideas. Messed up my head. Stayed with me next morning, right to the afternoon. It was sunny, I was heading for the club. Snooker club, somewhere that affirmed the reality of spherical forms and their physical interaction. Hit the cue ball, pot the black, it's pretty simple to me.

However, there was something odd about my perception as I walked through the streets. Caught a sight of the countryside past the edge of town, a green strip between houses. It was a hillside, with fields beyond and other towns beyond that. In fact, the land would go on forever if the world was flat. Okay, not forever – but as far as the coast, when it would change to a stretch of water that, itself, would go on forever. Then, perhaps, it reached the edge of the world.

So, not *really* forever.

The idea was crazy, yet this glimpse of green seemed, just then, to be part of a vast, expansive disc. The whole shape of the world had

changed in the manner I perceived it. A terror ran through me, like I was being observed from a telescope far, far away. They've got telescopes in space that can look right back to the very start of the universe.

Unless they *don't*, according to my friend.

He thinks space is nothing but a big, black dome studded with points of light. "What about the sun?" I'd asked.

"What's *that*?" he'd answered, glancing at the weather. Rain pattered on the pub windows, as it had for most of the week.

I gave him that.

Yes, I might smile a little, even poke a bit of fun, but the idea had left me giddy. What *about* the sun, was it moving round the earth? Or was a flat earth spinning like a tossed coin? I stopped in the street and glanced at the clouds moving overhead. For a moment, I thought perhaps they were truly stationary. The clouds might even be part of some transparent dome, creating a skilful illusion.

Suddenly, the road seemed to lurch away from me. The earth must be tilting down at its rim to make the sun appear to move. Feeling dizzy, I slumped against a garden wall where I clung on till the feeling passed. Got a funny look from a driver who, nonetheless, drove past. Restrained himself from dashing over and offering first aid.

Maybe I'd miss the snooker. Turned back the way I'd come, intending to go home again – but now, the road seemed to rear up before me at an insurmountable angle. I felt myself falling to all fours, as if a tiny insect ready to climb a wall.

Maybe insects were lucky. They didn't have conscious knowledge of the world and its shape, just a sense of their immediate surroundings. A breeze blew a sheet of paper down the road. It *must* have been a breeze, not gravity, unless the paper was falling and the road was vertical. That must mean the sun was ready to set if it was straight overhead.

Struggling to grasp reality, I looked at my watch. Only two o'clock. Again, the effect was broken and I got to my feet. The land had settled

once more. The rest of the walk was uneventful, though I kept my eyes away from the sky.

Reaching home, I sat down with a strong pot of tea. The earth seemed stable enough within my own four walls, so I could ignore what was happening outside. I gazed across the lounge at some familiar eyes that were no longer around, except in a treasured image.

Anne was smiling back from a sunny glade, so grounded and practical in her desires and beliefs. For her, it had been enough to enjoy a glorious day without questioning the astrophysics. Gone three years now, I kept the picture frame clear of dust more diligently than the rest of the house. Hobbies and the pub got me out, but the photo was there to come home to. Mick and some mates had a greater hold on my time than when Anne had been around.

What would she have made of Mick and his funny ideas? She probably would have chatted in a good-humoured way, too kind to become heated or riled into debate. I had held my own with Mick, I thought – but these alternative beliefs could burn with an unjustifiable fervour. Did the shape of the world make any difference to where the pub was, my house or the snooker club? The distances were all relative whether the earth was flat or round.

In fact, it was only very, very *slightly* round from a local point of view. It curved the couple of miles in question just a fraction of a degree, probably impossible to measure. So if it was impossible to sense or measure, how was that any different from saying there was no curvature at *all*?

Worrying, I thought, turning away from the photograph. I was in danger of thinking that *maybe*, in some tiny regard, Mick might have a point.

Look, I'm reasonably liberal. I don't like condemning someone for their strange but harmless ideas – and this was the one point, I felt, where I could agree with my friend. In all likelihood, from the perspective of a suburban resident and now retired taxpayer, there was no subjective

difference between living on a flat earth or an earth that was physically round. It was only the night sky and movement of heavenly bodies that provided any real evidence. But if these were different from what we'd been told, the flat earth theory could be – if not exactly *real* – at least a viable alternative.

Maybe Anne knew, I wondered. She was 'up there' now, I assumed, in whatever spiritual realm had awaited her. A literal heaven would, for me, be in outer space, while for Mick? It might be some kind of cloudscape in the firmament, presumably flat as well. Neither theory denied the world we experienced or the world of a possible hereafter.

Then the phone rang. It was the very man, 'flat earth' Mick. "Oh – not at the snooker?" he asked, surprised not to encounter the answerphone.

"Don't think so," I said. He was ringing a landline, after all.

Mick was still a bit skeptical. "Unless your answerphone's got AI and that isn't really you...?"

"Great AI...what, as grouchy as ever?"

He chuckled. "I'm the one who was grouchy. Like to apologize for the other night. Left a bad taste in the mouth. Bit like that iffy stout."

We like trying different beers, but sometimes you draw a dud. "Oh, that stuff," I sighed. "Yes, be glad when they've finished the barrel..."

Mick hummed in agreement, adding a longer explanation.

"Sometimes, when I argue something...if I just push a little harder, I think I'll make a breakthrough. Get the other guy to agree."

"And you didn't?" I recalled.

"You're a tough nut," he said. "Actually, I admire that. You were holding your views as tough as my own, even though...well, they're mainstream."

"Doesn't mean I wasn't curious," I said. "That's why I like our chats."

"And the drink was flowing, I get it. Even so, Ray...I went a bit over the top."

"Apology accepted," I said, "even if my head's still twirling from all those cosmic thoughts."

"That's why you're not at the snooker?" he asked.

"Partly. Probably," I said, glancing briefly back at the photo of Anne.

Mike continued after a short pause, maybe sensing my introspection. "Hey, I've been thinking about what you said."

Distracted, I could barely remember. "What was that...?"

"You know, about the globe-shaped earth," he replied. "How it keeps its atmosphere, how gravity works. Look, I hate to admit...while I don't necessarily *agree*, it's hard to refute everything."

"Oh...so you're a flat earth *waverer*?" I asked, having had my own certainties challenged that afternoon.

"Well, I wouldn't say *that*," said Mick. "But maybe the earth shapes itself to our expectations. We see what we want to see, so either way is perfectly valid."

That sounded even more confusing.

"Thanks for the call," I said. "But I've got a headache, I want to lie down."

"Okay – pub soon?" asked Mick.

I just hummed.

The sun was setting over the rooftops through the window.

Although I was sitting on a reassuring sofa, I had the sudden, alarming sense of being suspended over a pane of glass, looking deep, deep down into a huge, glowing orb. I clung to the sofa, desperately. If I fell, would I go straight through the glass, all the way to the sun? Quite a fall by any reckoning, even if – according to Mick – the sun was just a thousand miles away. I would streak towards it like a meteor and burn to cinders in its fiery maw.

Although shouldn't that be *up*? If the sun went down at night, the land had to be rising.

Again, the illusion was shattered. My sofa returned, in perceptual terms, to the plain old horizontal. Logic, somehow, had saved me this

time. If the earth was flipping like a coin, what was on the other side...another world? And the coin idea meant it was night on one side everywhere and daytime on the other. I knew Australia was bright when we were dark, making the thing impossible.

Feeling better at last, I slept. Then next day, I awoke with another thought. Maybe the sun only cast its light over half the disc at a time, like a searchlight or spotlight in the theatre. It must be matched by another sun rising as it set, rotating in opposition round the disc. There was no need for the disc, or the earth, to be spinning at all. So no need for more dizzy spells!

I looked out of the bedroom window, which had a higher view across the suburbs. The sun had risen, of course, but was it the same sun? Not if my theory was correct. As the sun was nothing but a shining circle, who could possibly tell? If the twin suns were identical, the effect was the same as one.

I took Mick up on the offer of another drink. They had changed that dodgy stout for something better and we enjoyed a couple of pints. I explained my theory, literally, on the back of a beer mat. Mick shook his head doubtfully as I spoke with greater resolve.

"Okay, last week, you disturbed me. Really shook me up, I fell over in the street. But this new idea, it *works*," I said, prodding the diagram with my pen.

Mick was the scowler this time, as if I was looking back at myself. "I was going to tell you," he began. "I've been down the library, went straight through the astronomy stuff. Should have done it before. Sat for two hours with a Thermos. Newton, Galileo, they got it right. Spheres in a void, that sums it up. I'm now an ex-flat earther!"

Was he smiling a bit, even mocking me? Taking me for a fool? It might be easy to do so, although the sense of awe I felt at my newfound knowledge had energized my mood. It was not a feeling I wanted to lose.

"You've changed, I've changed," I said. "You could always change *back*."

Mick shook his head. "Don't think so, Ray. Don't think so. Anyway, one little point..."

I was meant to look worried but maintained a confident gaze. "What...?"

"I admire your imagination," he said. "But surely, with a couple of suns...wouldn't you see one setting as the other rose?"

"Across the whole of the earth?" I frowned. "There would be clouds, mountains, atmospheric haze. We're talking thousands of miles, I don't think so."

I started to expound some more but Mick waved my words aside, steering the conversation away. Calmer waters, he said, like politics.

Where we usually agreed.

I thought some more in the clear light of day, rising earlier than usual. A yellow sun glimmered through the kitchen window, briefly visible between neighbouring homes. Mick's point had bothered me more than I knew, spoiling my night's sleep. The sun was a brilliant object, after all, so there might well be times when a second sun would be clearly observed. The twin-sun concept explained night and day on a flat earth, with simultaneous dawn and dusk, but had this troubling discrepancy.

I looked down on my coffee cup, noting its circular shape and the liquid it contained – like a tiny sea. A visual medium could be helpful in divining the nature of the world.

Popping upstairs, a rummage in a cupboard produced a friend from the past. It was a little tin box with my name on the lid - 'RAY DONNER, FORM 2B' – scratched with the very instrument I sought. Opening the box, I found a pencil, ruler, set square and protractor, all a bit worn but serviceable. Best of all was an instrument that hinged wider and wider, like a ballerina doing the splits. There was a stubby pencil fixed to one leg, the other tipped with a spike. Yes, a pair of compasses – not the navigational kind, but equally useful in charting the seas.

Downstairs, I spread a sheet of paper on the kitchen table and punched its centre with the spike. Punched the table too, I realized, but

the wood made for a firm pivot. Holding the gnarled knob that protruded from the top of the compasses, I twirled it between my fingers. Following this motion, the pencil drew a smooth graphite circle.

A flat earth.

So how would the continents lay? Not like an atlas, I thought, stretching left to right. No, they must radiate *out* from the middle. So the equator would come halfway between the centre and edge. Squeezing the compasses, I halved their angle and drew a second circle within the first. Removing the instrument, I could see the tiny pinprick at the centre of the circle.

That must be the North Pole.

I could imagine an explorer standing there, seeing the way the universe worked. This was surely where the double sun was obvious, so who might this man have been? The very man, indeed, who had discovered the earth was flat!

That proved it to me, utterly. After all - with no discrepancy, *no-one* would know the truth. A perfect illusion would be a contradiction, hiding the art of its trickery. The error was a thoughtful clue, provided by the earth's creator.

Working freehand, I sketched in the continents. They were rough squiggles but suddenly, incredibly, the map looked truly convincing. Antarctica, of course, was no longer a pole. It was a circular continent at the rim. No wonder all those scientists had bases there, clearly guarding the secret!

I gazed down on my sketch from on high, the creator of this little world. And higher than me, in the firmament, another was gazing down. Anne would be up there, knowing the truth.

She would be smiling, too.