

MOTEL OF THE MYSTERIES

By David Macaulay – a condensed version

It is the year 4022 and an intrepid archeologist has just discovered the buried ruins of a 20th-century motel. What will be his startling – and wholly erroneous – conclusion about American civilization?

In 2008, a cataclysmic coincidence extinguished virtually all forms of life on the North American continent. On the morning of November 29, an accidental substance called third and fourth class mail buried the North American continent under tons of brochures, fliers, and small containers called free. That afternoon, impurities in the air finally succumbed to the force of gravity and collapsed on what was left of an already stunned population. In less than a day, the most advanced civilization of an ancient world perished.

The layers of *pollutantus literati* and *pollutantus gravitas* that covered the continent hardened into rock, and knowledge of the “lost civilization” vanished almost entirely. The picture of these fascinating people remained incomplete until 40 years ago, when world leaked out of Howard Carson’s startling discovery at the Motel of the Mysteries, in the area called Usa. Before his 42nd birthday, Howard Carson had accomplished nothing of consequence, aside from a number of visionary experiments relating to increased camel-hump productivity. In 4022, a restless Carson entered the 116th Cross-Continental North American Catastrophe Memorial Marathon. Well behind the rest of the pack, he found himself crossing rubble along the edge of a deserted excavation site. The ground below his feet suddenly gave way. He tumbled headlong downward. When the dust had settled, he found himself at the bottom of an ancient shaft, facing the entrance of a long forgotten tomb.

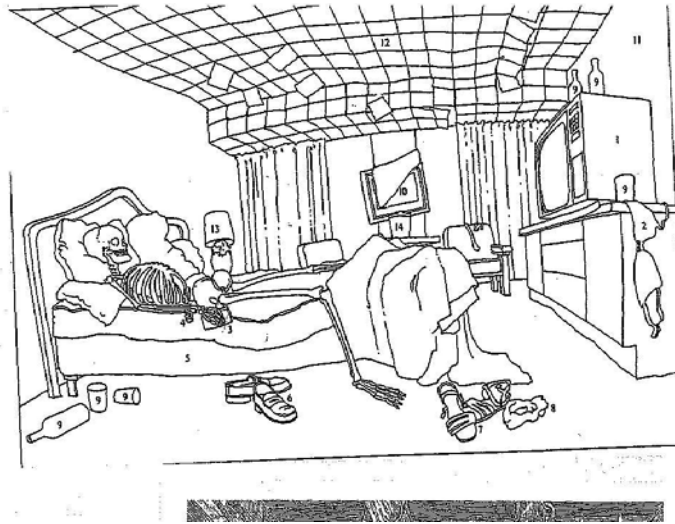
Light from the shaft caught the area around the handle on the tomb door. Upon closer inspection, Carson discovered that the sacred seal, which was traditionally placed on the door following burial rites, was still in place. Thunderstruck, he realized he was on the threshold of history. The mysterious burial customs of the late North Americans were finally to be revealed.

Shortly thereafter, Carson and a dedicated group of volunteers prepared to enter the tomb. The creaking of the ancient hinges cut through the silence like the scream of a fleeing spirit. As the blanket of darkness was stripped away from the treasures within, Carson’s mouth fell open. Everywhere was the glint of plastic.

“Can you see anything, Howard?” the others immediately asked in unison.

“Yes,” he replied. “Wonderful things!”

So it was that Carson began the first of seven years’ work on the excavation of the Motel of the Mysteries complex, and on the removal and recording of the treasures from Tomb 26. Everything in the Outer Chamber faced the magnificent Great Alter (No. 1), including the body of the deceased, which still lay on top of the Ceremonial Platform (No. 4). In its hand was the Sacred Communicator (No. 3) and around its wrist was a flexible golden band bearing an image similar to that of the upper altar. Although it was capable of communication with the large number of gods, the altar seems to have been intended primarily for communication with the gods MOVIEA and MOVIEB. Judging by the impact marks on the tops and sides of the upper altar, some aspect of this communication was



dependent upon pounding the surface. Below the exquisite glass face of the upper altar were a number of sealed spaces for offerings.

Signs of the ancient burial ritual were everywhere. A variety of garments, including the ceremonial chest plate (No. 2) and two pairs of shoes – one of them highly ornate (No. 5) – were scattered about. Various containers which had once held libations and offerings stood on the alter and around the platform. A statue of the deity WATT (No. 9), who represented eternal companionship and

enlightenment, stood next to the platform.

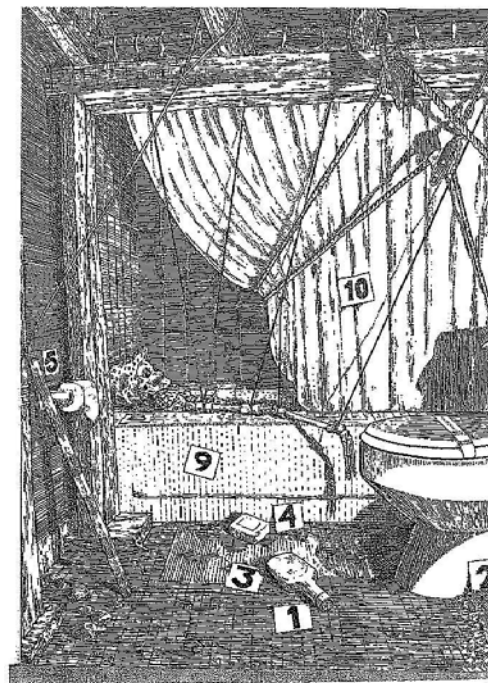
To ensure maximum comfort during external life, several pieces of beautifully crafted furniture were placed in the room. Perhaps the single most important article was the ICE (No. 10). This container was designed to preserve, at least symbolically, the major internal organs of the deceased for all eternity. The ceilings (No. 8) were covered with intricate mosaics, each decorated with a series of parallel perforations, with color added by applying the occasional and always subtle watermark.

Aware that the two pairs of shoes implied a double burial, and having seen only one body, Carson began searching for another chamber – and soon found the entrance to what became known as the inner chamber.

Although it seemed hardly possible, the contents of the Inner Chamber were even more dazzling than those already discovered. As Carson had predicted, a second body was present, and this one appeared to have been buried with more care and ritual than the first. Wearing the Ceremonial Head Dress (No. 8), it had been placed in a highly polished white sarcophagus (No. 9), which had in turn been sealed behind an exquisite and elaborately hung translucent curtain (No. 10). The extraordinary head dress stands to this day as an unparalleled example of flexible *plasticus* workmanship. Each colored disc was applied by hand, and together they form a pattern so complex that a full interpretation of the arrangement continues to elude scholars.

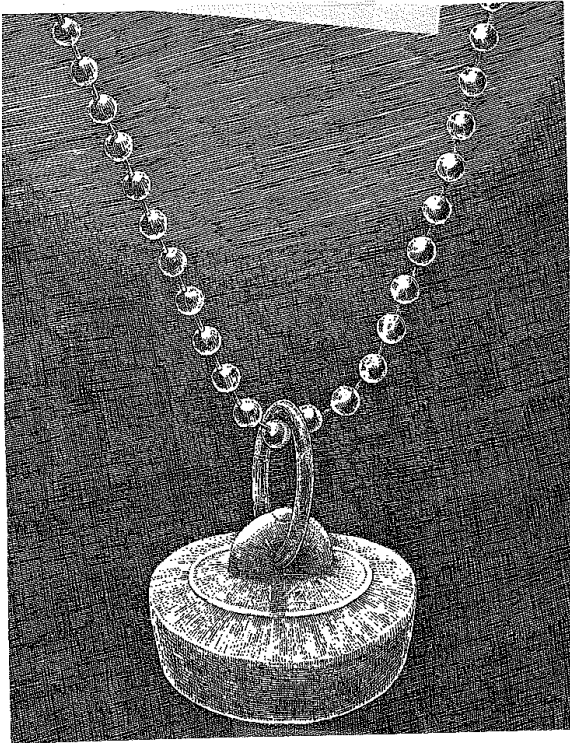
The proportions of the sarcophagus had been precisely determined to prevent the deceased from sliding down into a fully reclined position. The similar postures of the two bodies led Carson to the conclusion that the proper burial position had the chin resting on the chest. Although the outer surface of the sarcophagus was plain, there were ceremonial markings on the inside, including ten parallel rows of slightly raised discs along the floor.

Two water trumpets, one about five feet above the other, projected from the wall facing the deceased. Some of the music required during the final ceremony was produced by forcing water from the sacred spring through the trumpets under great pressure and out through a small hole in the floor of the sarcophagus. Pitch was controlled by a large silver handle marked HC. Other music came from the Music Box (No. 6) situated about the Sacred Urn (No. 2). Articles No. 1 and No. 4 were used to prepare the body for its final journey, and No. 5 was the Sacred Parchment, pieces of which were periodically placed in the urn during the ceremony prior to the final sealing of the tomb.



The Headband, which bore the ceremonial chant, and the Sacred Collar (see illustration at end of reading) were still in place on the Sacred Urn to which they had been secured following the ceremony. The Headband was worn primarily to hold the sacred collar in place. The inscription on the front of the band was the holy chant; the language was atonal, and the words were pronounced more or less as follows – San-i-ti-zed foryo-urp-rot-ecti-on. Experts date the collar at 1979 AD, making it one of the earliest collars ever found. The workmanship is unequalled.

Gradually, the excitement of those early days gave way to the drudgery of cataloguing each item in the tomb. Word of the importance of the find spread, and eager young archeologists, scientists and historians flocked to work as volunteers with the amazing Howard Carson. With all the additional help, work on Tomb 26 was completed by the end of the third season and plans were made to begin excavating the surrounding area.

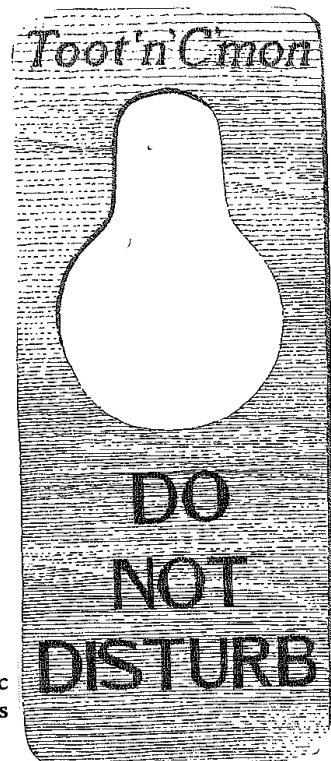


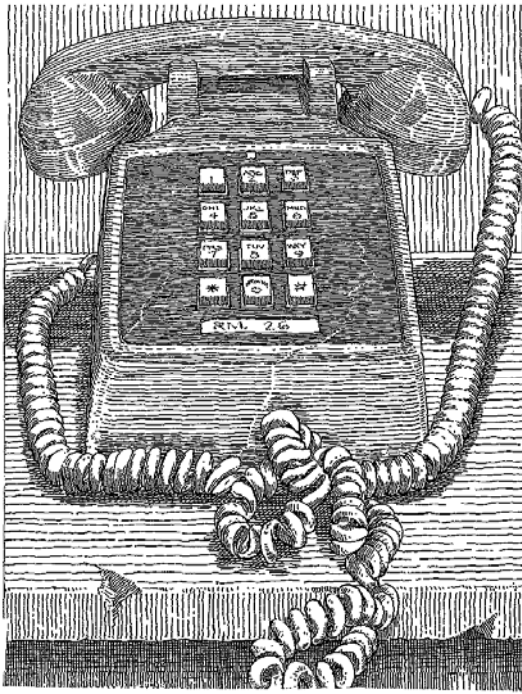
THE SACRED PENDANT

This exquisite piece of jewelry was found lodged in the silver-rimmed hole in the floor of the sarcophagus, where it had apparently been dropped. The beautiful pendant was carved out of rubber (now petrified) and has been inscribed with the markings $1 \frac{1}{2}$. It is connected most delicately by a silver ring to a beautifully formed silver chain. The symbolic derivation of the pendant's form has yet to be determined.

THE SACRED SEAL

Constructed of *plasticus eternicus*, this particular treasure has proportions of classic beauty. It was placed upon the handle of the great outer door by the necropolis officials following the closing of the tomb.





THE BELL SYSTEM

This highly complex percussion instrument was found near the statue of WATT. Markings similar to those on the face of the upper altar imply a symbolic connection to the gods. The Bell System was played by holding one half of the instrument in each hand and banging them together in some pre-established rhythmic pattern. The impact would cause a small bell inside the larger of the two pieces to ring. Both halves were connected by a beautifully crafted coil which would miraculously reform itself into the identical number of loops after each playing.

