Spamface

Down in the jungle, something stirs.

Martin Hayes

It was the first big story of my career. I'd graduated in 2002 and, after a couple of months bumming around, I'd managed to land a job at gommegomergomer.com. The pay was lousy and so were the hours but the editor hardly ever interfered with my articles. I was 25, stone broke and living in my pal Warren's junk room, but I was also incredibly happy to be an actual, real-life working journalist.

I got the story because no one else wanted it — five weeks in the Brazilian rain forest with the Lost Earth Project. The LEP had secured a hefty grant to track down and study the half-dozen or so still-uncontacted tribes living in the forest. It had been decided in 2008 that all efforts would be made to prevent these tribes from coming into contact with the outside world. This obviously ruled out study and observation, but in the intervening years technology had advanced to the point at which the LEP could incorporate declassified Military Invisibility Shield technology into a light and packable material. The plan was to use this new technology, in the form of invisible tents and hides, to monitor a tribe near the border with Peru. The LEP people would film them day and night, document their activities and customs, and I would be there, documenting the filmmakers, taking notes for what was planned to be a four-issue series on ggg.com.

It had taken more than a year to get authorization for the expedition. People were understandably worried that there might be some catastrophic clash of cultures. The LEP team consisted of three men, two women and their mascot, an AI raccoon called Spamface. He was one of the early series-theta models, not indistinguishable from a real raccoon but close enough and pretty sharp. They used him as a kind of personable computer: he recorded their conversations, translated the local dialect, transmitted their research, made the coffee and cracked dirty jokes. He walked on his hind legs and wore a small waist-pack in which he stored his cell-phone, a cigarette lighter (although I never saw him smoke) and a random collection of old electrical

components. He was treated like any other team member.

The invisible hides worked well and we set up a small filming post about four hundred yards from the village. We'd only been there three days when things began to go wrong.

Spamface started acting a little screwy, he'd forget to send the previous day's footage, make basic errors in his calculations, and the jokes just kept getting dirtier and dirtier. Steve, the team leader, thought that

system of pulleys, tracks and differently sized pieces of fruit to explain the heliocentric theory; built a small but functional dynamo from the odds and ends in his waist-pack; and started showing them old episodes of *Mr Bean* on his phone. They loved it.

Within 24 hours they had constructed an elaborate throne and it soon became clear that Spamface was being worshipped as a god. He had his pick of the women, although, thankfully, he was a first-generation model and so lacked the equipment to carry the offer through. Some of the men began tattooing Spamface's chuckling visage onto their chests.

They really did believe him to be a god. And who could blame them — a remote tribe who were met with a small, ferociously intelligent raccoon who just happened to speak the local dialect, who could create light in the darkness simply by winding the handle of a small machine, who could show them moving images of a man in a tweed jacket gurning and driving badly, and who imparted all his knowledge to them freely, without any ulterior motive.

They were spending up to seven hours a day kneeling and chanting at the foot of his throne when we finally received permission to go in under cover of darkness and get him the hell out of there.

We retrieved him without too much trouble, Steve was bitten on the wrist while trying to deactivate him but that was as bad as it got. By sun-up on the following day, we were ten miles away.

The whole thing had been such a fiasco that ggg.com decided to spike the article — eight hard days in the jungle, and all for nothing.

I kept track of the story though, and when news of the lost tribe broke, some missionaries tracked them down and tried to convert them. The tribe threw them out of the village. The chief was later reported to have said that: "A talking raccoon was one thing, but outlandish stories of loaves, fishes and virgin births was simply too much mumbo-jumbo to be believed." ■

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maybe the high humidity levels were playing havoc with his circuits.

On the fifth day we woke as usual at 6 a.m.. Spamface was gone, and coming from the forest was a kind of low, monotonous chant.

Steve fired up the camera and zoomed in on the commotion.

Spamface was sitting nonchalantly on the steps of the chief-elder's hut, completely surrounded by chanting tribesmen. The women were all kneeling and rocking back and forth. Spamface crossed his legs and began telling one of his jokes and soon they were all crying with laughter.

Steve's first instinct was to rush into the camp, grab the pesky raccoon, poke his finger into its right ear and flick the off switch. He couldn't though: contact with the tribe was forbidden. He'd have to get permission from both his bosses and the Brazilian government and without Spamface's high-speed transmitter that could take hours, even days.

By sundown Spamface had shown them how to make alcohol; used a complicated

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