

The Cult Of Ciudad Mitad

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In the quaint town of Lulumpamba, in the valley of Lulumpamba Plain, stands a grand shrine to the equator, Ciudad Mitad. Legend maintains that members of the celebrated Geodesic Mission, caught by surprise by a sudden storm, once pitched camp at the very site, huddling together under wool blankets as hail battered the donkeys and the horses out beyond the canvas flaps of the tent. By studying the properties of the equator, the expedition made discoveries that led to the establishment of the standard unit of length, the meter. I first read about the cult of Ciudad Mitad in a note scribbled in faint pencil in the margins of an obsolete geology textbook, a first-edition volume held in the collection of the Museo Nacional, in Quito. Fascinated, I decided to travel to Lulumpamba, hoping to discover whether the cult was real. I arrived by bus the following day, alighting onto a sidewalk in a cityscape of brightly painted shops with charmingly faded signage, where bells were ringing in the steeples of a local church. After securing a room at a guesthouse, I went straight to Ciudad Mitad, a neocolonial monument rising beyond the central boulevard. Once merely a humble pole in the ground, today the shrine features a majestic walkway lined by the busts of geographers and geophysicists and geodesists who participated in the expedition, all culminating at the dramatic centerpiece of the shrine, a gigan-

tic stone tower topped by a bronze globe. A line of radiant yellow paint extends to the east and the west from the base of the tower, separating the north and the south hemispheres. That morning the sunlight was warm, which made stepping into the darkness of the doorway in the base of the tower feel pleasantly cool. I wandered the museum in the tower, inspecting exhibits about magnetism and polarity and flux, climbing all the way to the balcony on the roof, but while the exhibits were intriguing, the museum made no mention whatsoever of a cult. All that the guards were interested in talking about was Nikola Tesla. I spent the afternoon strolling around the rest of the town, querying bartenders and merchants, looking for somebody with information about the cult, but nobody in town would admit to having knowledge of the cult either. By then the sun was sinking over the hills beyond the valley. I ate a bag of takeout from a cafe in a nearby plaza before returning to the guesthouse to continue the search the next day. Over the following weeks, that became my routine: visiting the monument each morning, interviewing the locals each afternoon, all in hopes of finding some new evidence or clue. After all of that time, I still had found nothing. Gradually, however, despite that there was still no sign of the cult, a feeling of intense excitement began to build in me. An equinox would occur that month, and as the equinox drew closer, I couldn't help but think that the cult might gather that day to observe the occasion. I dared to hope the cult might finally surface. I became convinced that the cult would finally appear. Admittedly, I was also excited by the idea of being there at the equator on the day of the equinox, when every shadow in the town would align with the cardinal directions. At sunrise the shadow of the tower would extend far to the west, following the painted line on the pathway, and then gradually shrink toward the base of the tower, vanishing at the stroke of noon, and then grow back from the base of the tower, following the painted line on the pathway, coming to stretch far to the east by sunset. I fantasized about being there at the tower to experience the event at noon: that almost

mystical moment when every shadow within sight would vanish as the sun aligned directly above the town. The night before the day of the equinox, I was almost too excited to sleep. Yet when the equinox finally arrived, the weather that day was cloudy, a bleak indigo haze. I walked to the shrine anyway, but the sky was so overcast that the tower had no shadow at all, and the mystical moment at noon came and went with no visible sign of alignment, making the experience feel pointless. The cult never materialized. Disappointed, and strangely sad, I went to the cafe to sulk, drinking a glass of horchata alone at a table on the patio. I sucked at the straw without tasting, gazing at the boulevard in a trance. The patio faced out onto an intersection, and as a breeze rustled the leaves of the trees in the median, a pair of figures wearing panama hats approached a pink-haired figure standing at the curb. Each of the figures took out a brass compass. I had witnessed similar interactions at that intersection before, which had amused me, seeing people consulting compasses for orientation in a town famous for a landmark that was essentially a compass. Watching the interaction happen yet again, however, I suddenly realized that the scene had the appearance of a ritual. After the figures nodded at each other in recognition, then briefly examined the compasses, each of the figures bowed with clasped hands, as if in thanks or relief. Goosebumps spread down my arms. A sense of revelation. My heart had begun pounding. I rose from the chair. Dogs bolted into an alley. The pair of figures in the panama hats had already strolled off down the boulevard, but the pink-haired figure noticed me approaching and turned to confront me.

I tentatively took out the compass on my key ring.

“You seek the truth?” the pink-haired figure said.

Adriana was employed as a bagger at a supermarket, spending shifts diligently packing groceries into fluorescent bags, projecting an attitude of nonchalance, but even when at work she possessed a secret truer vocation, serving as a devoted acolyte of the cult of

Ciudad Mitad. We drank horchatas together on the patio as she told me about her life. She was mother to a pair of thankless children. She had been a teenager for both pregnancies. She didn't believe in marriage. She did believe in love. Her soulmate, regrettably, was a famous movie star who had never known she existed and had died the year before. She wasn't surprised that none of the others in the cult had wanted to speak to me. The cult wasn't exactly social. Ultimately, taking the time to explain the teachings of the cult to a foreigner wouldn't make any difference in the final outcome, the apocalypse was nigh, doomsday was obviously inevitable, so why even bother. To be honest she was only talking to me because she found me attractive. I shouldn't take that as a compliment, she emphasized. She was only attracted to people with strange faces. Anyway, she could take me to the gathering the cult was having that night, if the world hadn't ended first.

We met later that evening at her apartment, where her older son stood singing melodramatically into the microphone attached to a karaoke machine, ignoring her younger son, who sat at a table in the kitchen scribbling on credit cards with a crayon. A telenovela played across the screen of an ancient cathode-ray television distorted by warped bands of color. Adriana was applying eyeliner at the mirror in the bathroom, dressed in a beige robe. A matching robe had been laid out for me on the toilet. Wearing a robe to meetings wasn't required, she said, but wasn't exactly not required, either. Literally every other person there would be dressed in one. But whatever. She didn't want to pressure me. She wanted me to feel comfortable. I put on her spare robe, which had a desiccated wad of chewing gum stuck to the back and smelled strongly of sweat and semen, which she explained was because she'd had sex so many times in the robe and washing the robe had always seemed pointless. We left her apartment just after nightfall, hiking through town under the light of a full moon. Adriana took me by the hand as we walked. The air was cold. The streets were deserted. As the shrine came into view in the distance, she began

talking about the ritual with the compass. The cult was as old as the shrine, she said, had existed for nearly a century. At the time, identifying the precise location of the equator had been possible only by using the magnetic field of the planet for orientation. And yet as useful as the geomagnetic field was for navigation, the geomagnetic field served a greater, far older purpose for humanity. Generated by the cryptic movements of massive currents of molten iron flowing through the core of the planet, the geomagnetic field was modest in strength, a mere fraction of a tesla, and yet was staggering in scale, extending thousands of kilometers into space, where the energy of the geomagnetic field was what shielded the planet from the tremendous force of the solar winds released by the sun. Without the geomagnetic field, the magnetized plasma of the solar winds would have destroyed the atmosphere of the planet, rendering the surface of the planet as uninhabitable as the surface of the moon. Basically, the geomagnetic field was essential to the survival of life. And over the past century scientists had observed a startling drop in the strength of the geomagnetic field, a sudden weakening, which had recently begun to accelerate at a frightening speed. By all appearances, the geomagnetic field was in the process of dying. That was the universal truth, Adriana said. Thanks to the inverse square law, building a magnet powerful enough to replace the geomagnetic field would be technologically impossible. Even the most powerful magnet that humanity had ever created was pitiful in scale compared to the magnetic field of the planet. Faced with climate change or an asteroid impact or the eruption of a supervolcano, humanity possessed technology that could give the species a chance at survival, but humanity had no control whatsoever over the magnetic field of the planet and had no means of protecting the atmosphere if the magnetic field of the planet faded. In summary, the human species was doomed, and the only real mystery was how soon the end would come. Members of the cult obsessively consulted those brass compasses not as a method of orientation, but to check whether the geomagnetic field still

existed.

“Humanity is helpless. Whether the end comes tomorrow or next week or in a hundred years, all we can do is wait,” Adriana muttered.

As she rapped on a hidden door in the wall that surrounded the shrine, I thought about the magnetic field moving all around us, through the palm trees, through the pine trees, through the restaurants and the cantinas and the shops strung along the avenues, through the rubber in the stacked tires and the nylon in the colorful flags hanging over at the go-kart track, through the concrete bridge over the river, through the laundry pinned to clotheslines, through the bicycles leaning against railings, through the fabric of the curtains and the fibers of the rugs and the beds and the chairs and the luggage on the floor in every room in every guesthouse where all of the tourists were peacefully dozing, through the titanic amounts of earth that the hills contained. I felt worried suddenly. I hadn’t taken the talk of an apocalypse seriously. I had assumed talk of doomsday was just pessimism. I hadn’t realized the magnetic field was weakening. The lock on the door to the shrine rattled, a hooded figure peeked out at us, then the hooded figure motioned us in, and the lock on the door snapped shut behind us as we slipped down the walkway toward the tower.

The foyer in the base of the tower had been transformed for the ceremonies. Above a wooden altar lined with dazzling plasma lamps loomed an ancient painting of the Geodesic Mission, flickering with shadows that rippled across the canvas like the twisting bands of an aurora. Eerie panpipe music warbled from the speakers of a decrepit cassette player. Near the stairwell, a masked figure stood drawing scientific iconography on a magnetic writing board with furtive movements. Other cultists had already arrived too, scattered throughout the chambers of the tower. Most were dressed in loose beige robes, although some were reclined in dramatic positions that caused the collar to slip over a

shoulder or the hem to slip over a knee, exposing a chest or a thigh. Gloomy figures in hooded robes brooded nearby as squatting cultists flung handfuls of iron filings at gleaming lodestones. Crying quietly over a glimmering cluster of neodymium spheres, crouching figures plucked spheres from the cluster, then gently released the spheres, watching the spheres snap back to the cluster. Sobbing cultists huddled together around a levitating ring of bismuth. By the steps to the roof, a middle-aged colossus with big ears and a drooping mustache sat clutching a horseshoe magnet with a look of palpably existential desperation.

Drifting around in the borrowed robe, faintly shivering at the chill, I contemplated the atmosphere of abject despair that permeated the shrine as magnetism made objects leap and cling and hover in the air. From my daily visits to the shrine, I recognized a pigtailed guide who sometimes led tours of the tower, along with the hunched groundskeeper who tended the gardens. The guide and the groundskeeper were both too busy weeping to notice me.

“Humanity has existed for millions of years. Imagine being there to witness the end of such a long and beautiful civilization. To be one of the ones to witness the moment of extinction,” Adriana whispered. “All of us here have accepted the truth. That the loss of the geomagnetic field cannot be prevented, and that without the geomagnetic field life cannot survive.” She tightened her lips and flared her nostrils and visibly swallowed, as if picturing a possibility that made her profoundly emotional, and then glanced back over at me. “I have a secret though. I never look at a compass hoping the needle still points north. I cannot wait for the end to come. I want to be there. I would like to watch.”

Beyond the balcony on the roof, stars glittered in the sky, releasing tremendous storms of magnetism on worlds throughout the galaxy.

“You aren’t afraid of the end?” I whispered.

Tears were streaking down her cheeks now as she blinked, smearing her mascara, but

though the others in the tower radiated a terrible sadness, I was amazed to see that the expression on her face was one of eager anticipation, and that those tears on her face were tears of joy.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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