



NameThis

The old man lay dying, the sounds and smells of the hospital room like a background pall to his thoughts. He didn't need the doctors or the antiseptic, clinical and professional concern of the nurses to know he was near death. He felt it in his bones, in his once limber body now so stiff, like pre-rigor mortis, and in the stiffness of his thoughts. His vision was nearly gone, the room a dim blur of subdued activity. His family was near, in a waiting room somewhere, called by the young doctor who seemed to be the designated officiator of these affairs.

He wished the whole dismal affair over.

Nearly a hundred years of life experiences, summed up in less than five minutes thought. He remembered his boyhood, oh God, all that energy, where did it come from, and sadly, where did it all go? His marriage, three children, divorce, estrangement, a career, lonely retirement and then this final, vicious assault upon his body.

And always, the stars.

Really, the only regret.

From boyhood he'd watched the heavens with an undefined hunger filling his soul, wishing he was there/not here, with a deep yearning to understand the churning, explosive and ponderous movements of the galaxies in their journeys through the universe. He never even wanted to be an astronaut, no, this was something much deeper. He hungered to be one with the heavens, to watch through time as stars were born and died, to watch planets form, life evolve then die making room for yet new life, a continuous travel through universal evolution. He felt that was where he belonged.

But now his time was gone, the stars were fading, and he felt his body shutting down even before the urgent summons from the nurses to the doctor. His bowels loosened, the world went deathly quiet as he fell silently into the ravaging darkness. His last thought was a whimsical one: So now we find out; heaven, hell or damned all nothing.

Light, that errant child of stars, crawled willy-nilly through the cosmos, carrying encapsulated within its spectrum the gossip of the universe. Brought to life in the white

hot interior of a star, then cast out to wander for all eternity throughout the universe, each light beam had a story to tell, bits and pieces of its emitting star encoded within, like a space borne pheromone, informing all it touched of the health, the age and the happiness (or lack thereof) of its parent star. Thus the low level sentience that inhabited each star was aware, on a barely felt level, of the presence of its neighbors as the light waves were consumed by magnetospheres throughout the universe.

There were other users of the light, a race of sentient beings as ancient as the oldest stars themselves. They themselves knew not their own origins, nor did they care. They drifted with the winds of space, uncaring of destination, content to observe the unfolding of the never ending story of birth, death and the ultimate immolation of matter as eventually everything spun down to be captured by a black hole.

Like all other forms of life they varied widely in physical form, but the norm resembled interlocking energy fields spread across several light years. They had no names for either themselves as individuals or for their race; they referred to themselves simply as: Us; or in the case of individuals, a smaller us.

They used the light, used it to chat across the cosmos, encoding their own bits and pieces of data along with the emitting star's own knowledge. Their conversations were not, strictly speaking, conversations; more like billions of tiny bottles tossed into a vast sea. They spoke not in words or sentences but rather in large, complex structures of thought that transcended mere words. Time was meaningless, patience was not even a concept.

For them, even death was not a viable concept. But sometimes, while crossing the vast depths between galaxies they would lose focus, understandable after a few million years spent studying essentially the equivalent of their own navels. When this occurred they simply waited for the winds of space to blow them towards a planet inhabited with organic sentience, parked the majority of themselves in orbit while the core field fell through atmosphere until finding a suitable host. Suitable host could be defined as any sentient creature on the verge of birth. They would exist, in a strictly curtailed form, within the host from birth to death, regaining, from the mental patterns of the host, the focus they so desperately needed. Upon the death of the host the energy fields would simply abandon the body and rejoin the rest of itself in space, arrange it's fields so as to catch the strongest space winds and depart happily for parts wherever.

While intimately familiar with its host, and therefore all its emotions, drives and goals, they neither helped nor hindered in any way throughout the life of the host, discarding whatever memories that may have followed them once the host died.

Usually.

But sometimes it didn't work out that way.

They were they, struggling to become us, and the battle was vicious. They had circled the planet as the planet had circled its rather mediocre star. They had not much to do with the star, as it was a sad sort of star, weak, but content with its weakness, and uncommunicative. Some of them, the brightest and most restless, had descended to the planet, leaving them without focus, without purpose, without direction. But then they returned, bringing focus, discipline and an unsettling desire to be gone from this place.

They had also brought something called memories, disturbing patterns of random thought, alien memories, that burned, like acid, as they sought reunion.

It was a contamination.

They achieved some semblance of order, caught the solar wind and sought the vast emptiness between the stars, all the while struggling to become us, instead of so many unruly them. In their inchoate state different elements tagged passing light beams, spreading their message of distress in a widening sphere of confusion and dismay.

But there is Order in All, and it is the natural order that the weak shall yield to the strong, therefore the galactic wheel had spun but a quarter arc before they had become us, and serenity had once again taken hold where once fierce struggles held violent sway. The alien memories did not burn as before, although there were anomalies, some deserving of significant thought.

One memory of them all stood forth, disquieting, somewhat nauseous in contemplation, disturbing the new found cohesiveness of them.

They had a Name.

This fact was chewed over, argued, the whole threatening their hard won stability. They sought advice from Them, and in just three rotations of the Universal Wheel all of Us had grappled with the question posed by us. Many of Them, unable to satisfy Their natural quest for Order, lost cohesion and allowed themselves to be blown hither and yon by the winds of space, achieving, for the first time in Their history, death.

The problem was simple: They knew, all agreed, they had a Name. But the bigger question, the answer to which the very survival of Us hinged upon, was an even harder question to answer.

Just what, exactly, was a Name?