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The Turtle Problem

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for Short Fiction*

Quantum Particle Displacer, the man thought dryly, observing his reflection on the metallic surface before him. QPD. He chuckled, rapping his knuckles on the flawless titanium innards of the machine that contained him. *That's what the scientists call it anyway.* To him, it had a much simpler, provocative name—the name that the press had given it the day its purpose became known: *a time machine.* He pressed his palm against the cold interior, watching as the print from his hand's heat materialized and faded a moment later, ephemeral. *Like something out of a science fiction novel,* he thought, contrasting the surreality of the moment and the undeniable reality of the wall before him.

He remembered the day the scientists had come forward with their glorious new invention, glimmering in the fluorescents of the showroom. They explained briefly how it worked—something about how they had noticed a curious inconsistency during their particle collisions. A displacement. Hence the name of the machine. And from that displacement they were able to discover a method of tearing open the fabric of time itself, as the media so poetically put it. He didn't know how it worked other than that; he didn't need to know. He was the mechanic, the 'pilot,' so to speak. What concerned him was the concrete reality of steel and clockwork, and that was all he wished to be concerned with. Things that were immediate and touchable. Things that did not mutate or disappear at the slightest intrusion. If he had wanted to learn more he could have asked the scientist sitting across from him in the QPD, but he refrained from doing so, and the scientist, who was likewise occupied with the enormity of what they were doing, remained silent. The man doubted the scientist could have told him much more anyway. Those working on the project, he suspected, knew little more about the power they wielded than medieval smiths understood the molecular structure of the iron they pounded at all day.

Besides the scientist and himself, there was one other person on board: a priest. There had been much arguing over who would get to go along on this history-making trip that was limited to

so few, and the eventual compromise led to those two differing factions: a scientist and a priest. And the man himself, of course, but he didn't count. Necessary cargo. The priest hunched in the corner, his shoulders bent in continuous prayer as he massaged the cross strung around his neck. The man could understand his fearful yet eager anticipation. If things went as planned, the priest was about to meet his god.

As much arguing as there had been about who would go, there had been even more conflict concerning *when* they would go—not the date of their departure, but to what time they traveled. There was a catch in the project's wonderful scheme, a drawback that made the debates all the more fervent: this was a one-way trip. The scientists had discovered enough to send their QPD somewhere, but not enough to bring it *back*. And seeing as the construction of the machine counted in the billions of dollars in cost, this was the last vessel they would be sending out for a long time. *The birth of Christ! Some argued. The fall of Greece! The building of the pyramids!* Finally, a decision was reached: they would be going to the birth of life itself, where it all began, over three and a half billion years ago. Back to when a charred ball of dust and lava would spawn the first living organism—

—“we’re creating life, you know,” a woman murmured tiredly, nuzzling her husband’s shoulder with her nose as they lay side by side together in a tangle of white sheets. (The man reflected for a moment on how strange it was that even in his own mind, he should think of himself as “husband.” The man he used to be, not that long ago, was dead. The ghost that haunted him in his memory was not him. He was “husband.”) Her husband laughed and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her towards his chest. “Yeah, imagine us being parents,” he exclaimed, kissing her forehead. He bent to kiss her stomach as well, which protruded majestically from the level of the bed with child. The stubble on his chin tickled her flesh. “Close your eyes for a while, little one.” The husband spoke to the mound before turning to grin at his wife. “Your mamma and I have some adult things to attend to right now”—

The man sighed and started the initiating sequence that would propel them billions of years into the past. All of the goodbyes had been said already, all the final preparations made. None of the three aboard would return, after all. They all had volunteered for it—the priest hoped to meet his creator, the scientist observe the start of evolution. Both of them were to record their findings in the specialized files of the QPD, files that could withstand the test of several billion years until they were unearthed by the very scientists who had constructed this project. Still, though, friends and family

had come to see them off. The man, however, had no one to say goodbye to—

—“Are you sure you want to go through with it, honey?” Her husband asked the woman timidly as they lay together. “The doctor said it might be dangerous for you—” “Hush,” she had interrupted him, touching her nose to his in a comforting manner. “What’s life without a little risk? Besides, you can’t feel this baby inside me like I can. It’s a pulse, like a fire...a rhythm, almost, and I couldn’t bear to hear it silenced.” She smiled. “Besides, you’re going to make a great father. This is gonna be the luckiest kid on earth.” The husband gazed at her in awe of his own luck, though her encouragement had not stilled the unease inside him. He touched her collarbone with his lips, whispering, “I love you”—

The man felt the vessel shudder. Lights flickered on and off on the panel before him, indicating that all systems were in perfect working order. He grasped the chair behind him to steady himself, chuckling internally. *Man, our scientists are advanced enough to invent time travel, yet they couldn’t manage a smooth ride.* He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but he equated the sensation of time-travel to sitting in the back of a worn-out bus on a dirt road somewhere. He found it rather anticlimactic. Finally, the vibrations stopped. He noted how strange it was that there was no inertia. They had not changed location. Only time. He scanned the panel before him, checking that the internal systems of the machine remained intact. They’d be in a pretty sorry state if the oxygen recycling mechanisms or the like hadn’t survived the trip. The man turned to the scientist. “Now what?”

The scientist glared at him for a moment, as if the man’s nonchalant tone had been impertinent considering the situation. He checked an instrument on the table before him briefly. “We’ve done it. We’ve arrived, 3.7 billion years in the past.” He paused impatiently for a moment as the priest sunk to his knees, muttering “Hallelujah” under his breath. The scientist gestured towards several more complex looking instruments on the table. “For now, I have to gauge the atmosphere outside and the like before I can start trying to locate where life will emerge.” He turned and carefully pushed aside a microscope and a collection of samples that he had been scrutinizing before they left. They contained specimens of the simplest and hardest life-forms that the most brilliant scientists in the world could muster, the man knew. For comparisons or something. The scientist engaged himself with his tools, completely ignoring the other two companions with whom he would be spending the rest of his life. It’s a one-way ticket, remember. Figuring that he should at least try to socialize, the man went over

and sat beside the priest, a rotund yet healthy-looking man—starkly contrasting the bone-thin scientist—who seemed to be in a state of barely contained excitement. He looked like a dandelion, which at the slightest poof of air would dissolve into the wind.

“Nervous?” the man asked gently, the side of his mouth rising in a half-smile.

The priest chuckled. “He’s out there. I know it. I can feel it.”

“Who, god?” The man asked, mindful of the trace of skepticism that had crept into his voice.

“Ah, an atheist, are you?” the priest queried, his voice curious and inviting. He did not seem offended at all. The man hesitated before answering.

“Not exactly...it’s just that sometimes in life things happen—
—the day of birth had come. His wife had looked so strained, yet happy at the same time. But then the doctor had come into the waiting room to meet her husband, a grim look on his face. He had washed up, but the words the doctor came to say glared as if written in blood...—

—that makes you question whether or not the world is really as simple and...justifiable...as religion can make it out to be.” The priest looked upon him gravely, as if understanding that there was a deeper meaning behind the words the man spoke. He bit his lip before responding.

“I know that life can deal heavy blows to one’s faith, and sometimes it’s hard to see God in the chaos of the world around us, but...” He broke off, frowning. Suddenly, however, his face broke out into a brilliant smile. “After this mission, everything will change. When civilization finds our records, everyone’s faith will be reaffirmed, and the Creator will finally receive the homage he deserves.” The man thought for a moment, then decided to continue the discussion, encouraged by the priest’s welcoming manner.

“I don’t know...sometimes I think that if I were God, or some all-powerful creator, I wouldn’t have created thinking beings so that they could bow down in worship. I think I would have created...equals, I guess, to share the universe with me. I guess I would have created free-thinking and acting humans because otherwise, I’d be bored, and—

—“I’m so sorry, sir, but I’m afraid your wife has passed. She was warned about the danger of giving birth, and now...” The husband froze, all the color draining from his face in an instant. “And the child?” He asked, dreading what he might hear. “I’m sorry, but we were unable to save either of them. God be with you.” And with that, the doctor left. The husband collapsed into a chair, and from that position he did not move for days. He did not eat. He did not sleep.

He simply stared, thinking, I'm alone now. All alone.—

—“well, lonely, I guess.” The priest considered that for a moment. Before he opened his mouth to speak, however, the scientist approached them, his somehow apologetic smile unlike his previous aloofness. Both the man and the priest looked up at him expectantly.

“I know there was a lot of disagreement about who would be coming, with that ancient competition between science and religion, but...” He shrugged. “I don’t think what I do is really all that different from what you do. Spirituality explores the limits of the human soul, while science explores the limits of the human mind. I don’t think we have to be enemies.” He hesitated, then: “I’m sorry if I sounded rude before, but I’m just as overwhelmed as you are. Imagine what humankind can learn from this!” The priest smiled and nodded to the scientist, gesturing for him to sit down. It was the man who spoke first.

“So...what do we do from here?” The scientist pointed to his instruments.

“I’m still calculating the condition of our surroundings, the atmosphere and the like. Meanwhile, my scanners are sweeping everything around for miles. If there is a sudden change in energy from what my calculations perceive as the norm—the kind of energy life produces—we’ll sense it and arrive there as fast as modern technology can take us. My colleagues in this project were able to judge that the approximate location of the origin of life was...is...in this area, so we shouldn’t have to travel far. They also determined the exact date to within a week’s time of our arrival today. So until my scanners pick up something...we wait.” The man lowered his eyes.

—He lingered in that chair for ages, waiting. That was where the doctor had told him to wait, before taking his wife in, barring him from the birth because of the danger. He’d have been in the way. It wasn’t him being torn apart from the inside, oh no. So there he waited. And for what? For an absolution? He saw no hope for such a thing. What he was really waiting for, perhaps, was eternity to end—

—So they waited. And waited. Sometimes they talked, usually discussing the lives they had lived before, the ones they had left behind. It’s strange, the man caught himself thinking. None of it matters anymore, yet it is what all of our minds keep straying to—

—Now he was sitting in front of a blank tv screen, still waiting. The movie he had been watching ran out hours before. It had featured a husband and a wife, both achingly familiar. “What do you think he’ll be like?” The husband in the movie had asked, pointing the camera across the table at his wife. The image wobbled as he sipped

from a cup of coffee. The movie-wife grinned. "How are you so sure it'll be a boy?" The husband shrugged. "I have a feeling. I can see us playing ball together, you know, talking about sports and politics and whatever else catches our fancy. I wonder if he'll get married, have some woman come by and completely knock the wind out of him, or—" "Don't you think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves? I'm just hoping to make it past the diaper-changing stage. We'll see what happens after that"—

—Sometimes the topic shifted to philosophy and metaphysics, but nothing became too heated. There was no point. Any answer they needed they would get in less than a week's time. What does one talk about at the dawn of life itself, anyway?

About halfway through the week (time was kept by the instruments and the changing lights aboard the vessel) the scientist announced that he thought it would be safe to open the shielding over the windows of the QPD, allowing them all for the first time to see what the world looked like three and a half billion years before their births. The man rose from his favorite seated position in the corner and went over to the control panel, engaging the sequence that would lift the stifling shields from their view.

"Make sure you put on your protective glasses just in case," the scientist cautioned before giving the man a thumbs-up. The man nodded and punched a button, and the shielding fell away.

"I—it's beautiful," the scientist gasped. He turned to grin sheepishly at his comrades for a moment. "In a frightening sort of way." Neither the man nor the priest responded. They merely gazed on the awesome landscape before them with nothing short of naked wonder.

"It's like somebody took heaven and hell and juxtaposed them into the same realm," the priest murmured in awe. The man thought that an apt description: streams of lava from frothing volcanoes sliced through the landscape like demonic roads. Water, black with ash, boiled in violent whirlpools in some areas and stood silent and immobile in others, reminding him of stained mirrors. The sky, however, was magnificent. Every color conceivable traced its vibrant hue across the canvas of the sky, and bolts of lightning lanced down from the tumultuous clouds to shatter the sheets of water beneath them. They looked like skeletal and searing hands thrusting downward to pierce the ravaged earth below. Yet for all of its spectacular beauty, there was something missing. It was a wasteland—barren and completely devoid of life.

"You know how, when you look at a picture of a desert landscape," the man muttered under his breath, more to himself than his companions, "there's a strange, almost haunting beauty to

it? I think that's because you're looking at something so forbidding, so insurmountable, and yet life somehow manages to survive there. It's existence at its most basic level." He paused. "This place...it's almost like that, but...until there's something here to give it a...pulse, it will never be anything but a pretty picture."—

—*"She looks so beautiful right now, so at peace. Almost like she's sleeping." The other of the two conversing women sighed. "It's such a tragedy, dying at an age like that. And the child, too!" "Shush!" The first interrupted, giving her fellow a hard look. "There's the husband."*—

—*"It is said God created life from chaos," the priest whispered, gazing at the panorama before him. "If this isn't chaos, I don't know what is." After several more minutes of harrowing fascination, the scientist motioned for the man to close the shields and limit them once more to the sterile innards of the QPD. And so, sequestered once more, they returned to their previous occupation: waiting. Two days later, five days into their seven-day span, the priest spoke again, his voice betraying the first trace of urgency. "My God will come. As long as my faith is steadfast, we will see life itself begin"*—

—*"You promised you'd be there! How...how could you let her die?!" The husband demanded, shaking his fist at the wall of his empty house. "Some God you are! You promised...how could you do this to me, leave me all alone like this?!" He collapsed, the anger in his voice evaporating, replaced by an irrevocable despair. "And my son...everything's...gone..."*—

—The sixth day passed, and by the time the seventh dawned, all the occupants of the QPD were growing desperate. The scientist took to reevaluating his notes, again and again checking his calculations. "If we were wrong," the man heard him mutter in the early hours of the seventh morning, "the QPD could be a million years off...and we will have to live out the rest of our lives as a wasted effort..." He slammed his fist on the table. "But we couldn't have been wrong! Those predictions were precise. This must be the right time!" The priest, meanwhile, commenced muttering prayers under his breath at all hours, once or twice declaring tiredly that, according to the Bible it took seven days for God to create the world, so it would only be fitting that he reveal himself on the seventh day. The man, however, sat in silence, likewise chasing the phantoms of his own lost dreams. He remembered the day the scientists had approached him with the job offer—

—*"We're looking for somebody with your reputation and intelligence...somebody who'd be willing to dedicate their life to the prospect of discovery..." and, the reason lurking beneath all the bullshit, somebody who has very few familial connections that might distract him—*

—He had accepted without a second thought. He had “dedicated his life”—for whatever it was worth.

The seventh day was drawing to a close. The scientist’s checking of his notes had moved beyond frantic. Papers were scattered across the floor; the samples of life that he was supposed to compare to the life they found were piled in a heap in the corner. The priest sat with his head in his hands, breathing raggedly and whimpering slightly. The man remained stonily silent, a sentinel. The priest looked up as the last bit of sunlight—they had reopened the shielding in the hope of easing their feelings of trapped claustrophobia—dipped beneath the horizon.

“I,” he whispered, distraught. “I...was so convinced that, somehow, we were meant to be here—

—She told him it was meant to be! That if she finally managed to get pregnant after all those barren years that it must be meant to be! And he (not “I,” never “I;” he couldn’t be “I” anymore) believed her. What possible meaning could there be in this?—

—“that we were here for a reason. That after thousands of years of uncertainty, God would somehow reveal himself for us so that we could enlighten the rest of humankind—

—“She used to say everything happened for a reason! Oh, god... what reason could there possibly be for this? There can’t be order in this world—just chaos. And darkness. How else could this have happened?”

—“All the greatness in human beings—our intelligence...and our faith...finally came together for this moment. The pinnacle of our existence—”

—“Wait a minute,” the man interrupted, his eyes widening suddenly. The withdrawn and reticent quality that had characterized him throughout the waiting evaporated, replaced by an intense, strained expression, like a man trying to regain control of thoughts that have been swept up by a whirlwind. Slowly, he pushed himself to his feet, staggering to the corner of the vessel as if moving underwater. He collapsed to his knees in front of the pile of the scientist’s specimens, scooping as many as he could in the circle of his arms. With them, he made his way to the rear of the QPD, slamming a button with his elbow to open the chute he had helped design. He dropped his load of samples to the floor, selected one at random from this newly created pile, and smashed it against the metallic lining of the chute.

“What are you doing?!” the scientist demanded, leaping to his feet as the man selected another one and demolished it against the chute, vigorously shaking out its contents so that they splattered into the shaft. He grabbed the man’s arm to stop him, but the man

shrugged him off, continuing his systematic destruction. The priest rose, laying a gentling hand on the man's shoulder and saying in a soothing tone, "good man, I know we're all frustrated, but this is no way to—" The priest stopped mid-sentence as the man allowed himself to be turned. He was laughing.

"Don't you understand?" He exclaimed, a broad grin stretching across his features. He leaned down and plucked another specimen from the pile. "We are supposed to be here! We were here, now, three and a half billion years ago!" He smashed it against the chute.

"What do you mean?" The scientist asked suspiciously, staring hard into the man's wild and crazed eyes. The implications of what the man was doing were just beginning to dawn on him.

"It's us!" The man cried blithely. "We started it, with the life we brought with us!" He smashed another button, this time causing the chute to slam closed and eject its contents to the outside world, to a planet still in the infancy of its potential.

"Wait...did you just dump that...outside?" The priest asked hesitantly, bewildered. The scientist gasped.

"It's us...we are our own creators." He met the man's eyes for a moment, and, as if by unconscious signal, they both began to demolish the remaining samples simultaneously, refilling the chute. The priest hung back for a moment, his look glazed.

"I—I..." he stuttered, his mouth flapping. He closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them his gaze was clear and determined. He too proceeded to dump the life specimens into the chute. He smiled at his companions' dumbstruck faces. "Call it a leap of faith," he explained, a glint in his eye.

Finally, after the entire collection of life samples had been emptied into the waiting planet beyond them, they slid to the floor, out of breath and giddy. Cuts covered their hands from shards of broken glass and plastic, but they didn't care. They sat like that for several minutes in silence, struck by the enormity of what they had just done. At last, the scientist spoke.

"What...what does this mean for the world...for us as human beings?"

"It means," the man said quietly, "that humankind is much more of a family than anybody ever suspected. We are our own creators. That means that we are responsible for each other, and all life, like a...a parent is to his child. People ask if there is a meaning for our existence, and there is—it's because of loneliness. It did not even occur to any of us to hold back, despite the darkness, because we sense that there is something inside us worth continuing: each other...and the love we find there." The priest looked at the floor.

"But...what about God? Does this mean that—" He couldn't

finish. The man considered for a moment. Though he had never fully believed, his wife had.

“No...there’s a connection between things...a pulse, a rhythm, that life breathes into the world. Remember how empty the world seemed when we got here, with nothing but the horizon? I think that, the same way life gives a pulse to the world, human beings can give a pulse to the heavens. Individually, we are the height of consciousness, of reason, of happiness and despair...” He thought of his wife, of the beating hearts inside her—hers and their son’s.

“Together, though, isn’t it natural that we make something greater? As long as somewhere out there the urge to create exists, we—

—I—

will never be alone.”

“Time travel,” the priest murmured in awe, reflecting. He smiled. “It’s like that old story...something about turtles. A woman tells a scientist that the universe rests on the back of a turtle, so the scientist asks her what the turtle rests on—”

“It’s that metaphor for infinite regression!” The scientist interrupted, grinning at the priest. “She tells him not to be clever—it’s turtles all the way down.”

“*Infinite regression...*” the priest muttered, toying with the phrase. “It’s like faith. There’s no proof, no basis. You just have to hold on and run with it.”

The scientist whistled under his breath, his eyes twinkling at his two fellows. “So...what do we tell all the people waiting to dig up the QPD in three billion years? That turtles hold up the universe?” He laughed. “I already recorded that we made it, so they’ll be expecting an answer.” The priest shook his head.

“We don’t tell them anything,” he declared, smiling.

“What?” The scientist gasped, startled. The man glanced from the priest to the scientist, the side of his mouth rising into a devilish grin.

“We don’t tell them anything...after all, we’re already giving them the greatest message there is.”