

# PROBE

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## PROBE 194

December 2022

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# PROBE 194

December 2022

3. Editorial
4. Chairman's Note
5. Magazines and Books Received
6. Blast from the past PROBE 48 May 1981
6. Nova 2021 Finalist Incredible Soap by Andrew Salamon
17. No Lost Property Valentino Poppi – From RiLL
30. Nova 2021 Finalist Eternity by Deon Schneider
38. Nova 2021 Finalist Hive Mind by Gary Kuyper
44. Book Review Gail Jamieson
45. L.O.C. Lloyd Penny
47. AMAZON STORIES – calling for submissions



# Editorial

# Gail

One of the things I had promised to do once “50 Science Fiction Tales” was complete, was to scan in and save to the SFFSA Repository, the old paper copies of PROBE that were not yet saved there. This is from the beginning up to around issue 120. As I have been doing so I came across the editorial I wrote for the May issue of 1984 – number 59. In it I mention that having a tiny baby was keeping me far busier than I had expected to be. This made me smile. First of all I had produced an issue of PROBE when my daughter was only about 6 weeks old, and secondly that she is now 38 years old and has a nine year old son of her own, and thirdly that I am now writing an editorial for PROBE 194! Hard to believe that the various editors have produced 130-odd issues between then and now.



On a sadder note I have to report that one of our founding members, Niels Christiansen passed away a few months ago in the USA where he had moved some time ago. Before he left he sent me all the original documentation from SFSA (as it was then) and so we have been able to scan and save this information as well. You will have seen in a previous issue, the copies of the first issue of PROBE. We are grateful that he had the foresight to do this for the club.

And on to “50 Science Fiction Tales”. This is now available on AMAZON and the link is available at the end of this issue. It would be great if you could support the club and buy a copy. It has taken a lot of time and effort and celebrates 50 years of SFFSA supporting local authors.

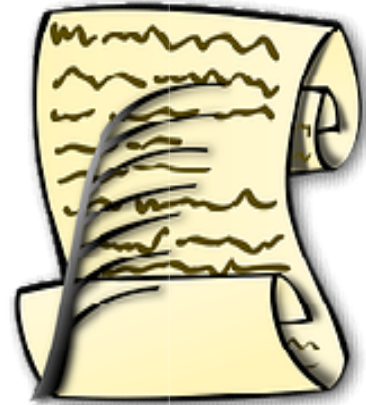
Club members will also have received by e-mail and with this issue a letter asking you to make a decision on how you wish to receive PROBE going forward, and how you will support the club financially. SFFSA is 53 years old and we ask you to help us to continue to bring Science Fiction and Fantasy to you.

We have just had another brilliant talk from Digby Ricci at our year end function. He entertained us with a sparkling talk on “The Handmaid’s Tale” and then about 24 of us went out to supper and thoroughly enjoyed his company further. After so long of not being able to get together, this was a real treat and enabled us to catch up and realise that we really enjoy SF and each other’s company.

RiLL, the SF group in Italy have just published their annual collection of winning stories from around the world and have enjoyed a weekend promoting it. There will be a full report on this and links to follow in the next issue of Probe.

# Chairman's Note

Well, well, well, would you believe I have been chairman for the past 13 years... 13 years! When I took over from my father, it was just a suggestion I made to him, but he took it as given, and the following year, 2010, I was made chairman. So here we are, so many years later. It has had its ups and downs, always something going on, meetings to prepare, short stories to read (and critique as well), making sure the committee members do what they should, changing committee members, etc. etc.



I won't say I enjoyed every minute of it, but overall my time on the committee and as chairman has definitely been enjoyable. However, all good things must come to an end, and as such, I am stepping down as chairman, and from the committee. I was on the committee for four years before becoming chairman, so 17 years is enough, time to move on. I won't ever be leaving the Science Fiction and Fantasy club, I am, after all, a life time member, and I do mean that in the literal sense, since I have been part of this club basically since I was born. I guess science fiction and fantasy are simply engrained into me by now, and I still love watching it, reading it or looking at it (I have a lot of art books). So nope, still going to be around for a long time, just now as a normal member, something I am kind of looking forward to. You know the meeting is coming up, and you are not sure if you want to go or not? As chairman there is no choice, now there is! Hehe.

We just had our yearly dinner, and as has happened so much over the past few years, things were different this time from previously. However, things actually went very well, and I think the new format worked great, with everyone enjoying the talk, and having a lovely meal afterwards. All our meetings are still going quite well. The club still hasn't fully found their feet when it comes to the hybrid meetings, something still to be done there, but overall it works well, and we even get people from overseas which is great.

Nick has done a great job taking over from my dad as meeting organising. Gavin still laments the club having such an awesome library, but so rarely used. His updates on the website are usually quick, and helpful. I think our website works very well. Gail has been editor for Probe for so long, and does such an amazing job, I am not sure who could ever replace her. Nial is currently secretary, and as helpful as ever. Eileen is treasurer, she really wouldn't be anything else, it is just not in her nature, but doing books (which is basically her job), that is easy enough.

I will still run the next AGM, but it is there that I will be announcing my leaving the committee. Hmm... I still remember the first few times I had to run the AGM, I was so nervous beforehand, I would write all the points I wanted to make, and then memorise them so I could do a good speech at the start of the meeting. However, as the years went by, and I got comfortable in the position as well as all the many known, and friendly faces at the AGM, it became easier and easier. I wish the next chairman good luck!

## Magazines Received

**Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club]**

**Reece Moorhead** [reecejbm@gmail.com](mailto:reecejbm@gmail.com)

Issue #64 September 2022

Issue #65 October 2022

Issue #66 November 2022

**Ansible David Langford**

September 2022 421 <http://news.ansible.uk/a421.html>

October 2022 422 <http://news.ansible.uk/a422.html>

November 2022 423 <http://news.ansible.uk/a423.html>

## Books Received

### JonathanBall *Publishers*

Jessica S Olson A Forgery of Roses HarperCollins UK Children R230.00

Frank Herbert The Second Great Dune Trilogy Orion R595.00

## Blast from the past.... from PROBE 48 May 1981



In 1962 France issued a stamp to commemorate one of its early film pioneers, George Melies, who was also one of the founders of science fiction film. Melies (1861 – 1938), moved into the theatrical world in 1888 when he bought the Theatre Robert-Houdin and performed

his own magic show. In 1896 he followed the film work established by the Lumière brothers in France and obtained a motion picture camera and made his own short films. Melies also specialised in trick photography. In 1902 he produced one of the first science fiction films – “Le Voyage Dans La Lune” – “Journey To the Moon”.

The most memorable shot from this short was the space craft striking the Moon in the eye. Ouch!. (*And see the cover of PROBE 140 for our own version.*)

World War I disrupted his operations and he stopped making films. There was a brief time in the 1920's when his films became popular again. The postage stamp depicts Melies as well as a picture of the firing of the space craft towards the moon.

## Nova 2021 Finalist

### Andrew Salamon Incredible Soap

Azola takes a second surprised breath of the soap nestled in his cupped hands. ‘This is amazing,’ he whispers to himself, as if he’s in church instead of a grubby hotel bathroom on the cut-rate side of Maputo. *But it’s even more than that*, he thinks, *it’s whatever slots in above amazing, right at the top.*

He closes his eyes, shutting out the crooked spider web of mould creeping across the bathroom wall, buries his nose in his hands and inhales a third time, becoming all nose and dragging every molecule of the soap’s fragrance into his nasal passages. The asthma that has dogged him since childhood dissolves from his chest as the scent floods his body.

*This soap is incredible.* He nods in awestruck agreement with himself. *That's the right word.* For Azola, incredible is the pinnacle. Even extraordinary and unbelievable have to make space when incredible enters the room. And this soap deserves the description – nothing short of incredible.

He opens his eyes and pulls the torn wrapper away from the soap, looking for a brand name. There is none. The wrapper is made from flimsy plastic and has no distinguishing features, not even a distinct colour. He lets go of the wrapper and it floats down to the bathroom floor, rotating slowly like a delicate satellite on its final descent, coming to rest next to his right foot. Azola turns his attention to the soap itself: flat and round, smooth and white, shot through with tiny copper-coloured flecks. It offers no clue to who made it, or where it came from.

He strips off his clothes. When he first saw the state of the shower he had elected not to use it, but something about getting complementary soap in such a squalid place had aroused his curiosity when he spotted the bar neatly perched on the side of the basin. Now that he has smelled the soap there's no doubt; he *has* to wash with it.

The cold shower water makes him catch his breath. He is willing to bear it, but to his surprise it turns lukewarm after a minute. He starts by lathering the soap over his face and close-cropped hair. The effect is extraordinary. Azola feels as if the soap is doing a lot more than just washing away the dust and sweat of his luckless day; it is stripping away the discouragement and disappointment that has dogged him the last few months, leaving him fresh and unblemished, and feeling as if at least a decade has been subtracted from his soul. His recent bleak thoughts around quitting his business – and last night's darker deliberations of quitting a lot more than that – are swept away by the divine smell of the soap that seems to be infusing not just his skin, but his whole being.

The bathroom window sports a bullet hole in the glass, through which the clatter of diesel engines and shouting from the street below try to penetrate his reverie, but the noise fails to make a dent in the happy, sweet-scented trance the soap has gifted him.

Before long, his vigorous lathering has reduced the soap to a sliver. A minute later, it's gone. Azola stares at the wisp of foam in his palm. Under normal circumstances he would have been dismayed at its loss, but he feels far too energized and happy to be upset. He is filled with a burning desire to get dressed in his best, least-dirty clothes, and to go out and explore. Outside of this grimy hotel with its incredible soap, Maputo at night is waiting.

Azola steps out of the shower and reaches in vain for a towel from the empty rack. He left his own towel behind in Beira three days earlier, but he is not going to let such a small thing as an absent towel bother him. He leaves a wet trail of footprints on the threadbare bedroom carpet and pulls a T-shirt from his bag to dry off with.

He dresses while surveying his shabby room, amazed that the sight of it has no ill effect on his buoyant mood. When he first checked in, he had been miserable at the thought that even this squalid box is actually more than he can afford.

His suitcase, overflowing with samples, lies open on the lumpy single bed. From inside his case the objects of his undoing leer at him in vibrant yellow, red and blue, not to mention the leopard-print model that had been such a high-volume seller only a few months ago. Azola had recognized their potential the moment he spotted them at the electronics fair in Johannesburg: his salesman's eyes appreciating them not just as alarm clocks, but as possibly the most sellable items he has ever come across. To begin with, the clear plastic of the clock face allows for a photo to slide in behind the numerals; a nifty feature on its own, but what really sold him on them was being able to record a personalised wake-up message. And they were cheap. So cheap he bought hundreds of them.

The alarm clocks were a huge success. His existing customers of shop owners and stall proprietors – not to mention more than a few new ones – were all so enamoured with the clocks that he sold his entire stock in less than half the time he thought it would take.

And that's when, worried about competition, he borrowed as much money as he could and bought the vendor's entire remaining stock.

The trouble started soon after he tried to sell the second batch.

Once the rumours about the clocks being possessed started, they spread like a ravenous fire through dry grass. No one could actually show him a single possessed clock, but this made no difference to the stigma that was now attached to them.

In Manica, the owner of a dry goods store held out a boxful of smashed clocks, their faces cracked and their cheerful casings fractured. Despite his protestations of buyer's liability, Azola had felt inclined to reimburse her since her other hand gripped a machete.

A distributor in Xai-Xai told him that the family's dead dog was haunting him through the alarm clock. The man put his hand on Azola's shoulder and confided that if the clock was just barking, it would still be all right – to be honest he missed that old dog – but the sound that came from the clock was a desperate howling, and that was just too much for anyone to wake up to every morning. The man looked with sad eyes at the smashed clock face, decorated with a photo of a short-haired Africanus with a lolling tongue.

It was the same wherever Azola went, leaving him stuck with a sample case full of unsold alarm clocks, not to mention a container full of them at home. He tried phoning the merchant in Johannesburg, but there was no answer and eventually the voicemail box was full.

Azola runs a hand through his now-toxic stock and laughs. The soap has changed his entire outlook on the alarm clocks. His recent misfortune now feels distant and unreal, as if it all happened to a lesser version of himself, a pre-soap facsimile of this new and revitalized Azola. He closes the door behind him and skips down the dimly-lit passage of the Hotel Última Parada. His Portuguese is strong enough to know this means Last Stop Hotel, but tonight he feels like his good fortune is only starting.

Downstairs at reception, the same surly woman who had checked Azola in is still seated behind the desk, reading a magazine. She hadn't bothered to even look at Azola when he first arrived, choosing instead to keep her attention focused on her magazine as she slid his room key across the table after taking his money.

Azola is already past her desk and pushing the front door open when the scent of the soap reaches her. She looks up, smelling the air and stands, stretching to catch a

glimpse of whoever just walked past, but Azola is already out of the door and headed into the humid Maputo night.

The sidewalk is almost as potholed as the street in this part of the city and no more than two out of every ten streetlights work, but none of this bothers Azola. He struts his way along the sidewalk, certain that no piece of rubble or tree root would even consider tripping him up.

A large dog starts barking at Azola from behind a tall chain-link fence half a block away. As he approaches, the dog sniffs the air and falls silent. Azola flashed it a winning smile as he passes. The dog tracks him with its head tilted at a curious angle.

After half an hour of contented wandering, he comes to a corner club.

The club is called Bento's and the rhythm of bongo drums, trombones and guitars spill onto the street outside through its red, yellow and green doorway. At least two dozen people are waiting outside the entrance to get in. Azola joins the crowd, happy to wait his turn while gently bobbing to the music pulsing from inside.

A fresh evening breeze wafts across the back of his neck. The couple standing in front of him turn around and stare. They looked puzzled for a moment, then they beam at him and move aside so he can pass. Seconds later the rest of the crowd in front of the club follow suit. The bouncer at the entrance waves him in with a grin.

The Rastafarian colour scheme continues inside the club. Azola is thrilled to see the place is busy but not yet crowded. He takes a seat on one of the stools lining the bar counter.

The bartender comes over and Azola's eyes grow wide. The man has the largest and most brutal nose piercing he has ever seen: it looks like a piece of horn or a thick shard of bone, spiking both his nostrils and septum. Azola finds it hard to imagine that the bartender can breathe through his nose at all.

'Yes,' says the bartender. It is a command, not a question; one word that informs Azola he should order right away, or the privilege will disappear, possibly forever. He is amazed at how the bartender can pack so much meaning into a single syllable.

'I'll have whatever's your speciality,' Azola says.

The bartender grunts and disappears. A few moments later he returns holding a tall glass filled with a dark brown liquid and a single block of ice. 'Ninety meticals,' the bartender says.

Azola hands him a hundred metical note and motions for the man to keep the change.

'What is this?' asks Azola, pointing at his drink. Small beads of moisture are blooming on the surface of the glass.

'A Bom Rasta.'

'What's in it?'

'Rum.'

Azola gets the distinct impression that their conversation about the drink is over. He decides to try a different approach.

'Are you Bento?'

'Bento's dead.'

Azola smiles. Despite the bartender's gruffness he is having a wonderful time. He takes a sip of the Bom Rasta and stifles a cough. The bartender had not been kidding about the rum.

He becomes aware of someone standing close behind him and swivels around on his stool. She has curly hair and big brown eyes and Azola has no doubt she is the most attractive woman to ever speak to him.

She leans in. 'What's the name of that aftershave you're wearing?'

Azola swallows and shakes his head. 'I'm not wearing any aftershave.'

She contemplates this for a few moments and takes a long drag of a Palmar Menthol. 'I don't blame you,' she says. 'If I had something that smelled that good I wouldn't tell anyone what it was, either.'

'No, really. I—'

She silences him with a finger on his lips. 'Are you a lucky man?'

For the first time since his shower with the incredible soap, Azola feels the spiteful touch of insecurity, like the snap of vulture's wings disturbing his soap-conferred poise. He lifts his shirt and takes a deep whiff of himself. His reply is brimming with self-confidence. 'I do believe I am.'

She flicks her cigarette away and takes his hand. 'Come to the back. It gets boring at the bar.'

Azola makes no objection as she leads him through the crowd to the back of the room, where a closed door is guarded by a larger and more serious-looking bouncer than the one who waved him in from the street.

A nod from the girl and the door swings open to reveal a large room with a full-size snooker table at its centre. The surface of the table looks different to the usual green baize, but Azola catches only a momentary glimpse of it before the table is obscured by the men milling around it.

The girl lets go of his hand and heads back to the main area of the bar. She turns her head and gives him a lingering look. Azola gets the impression that he is part of a task she has now completed. He winks at her before turning his attention to the dazzling room. The odd table at its centre has made him very curious.

He moves closer to the snooker table. The baize that must have covered it at one time is gone, exposing the smooth dark slate underneath. Narrow planks divide the table into six lanes. At the far end of each lane rests a piece of wilted lettuce and a slice of tomato.

'It's a racing track,' says an oily voice to his left.

Azola looks up. The voice belongs to a muscular man wearing a straw trilby and holding a thick cigar in one hand. 'Racing for what?' Azola asks.

'Come have a look.' The man with the trilby points at a cardboard box on top of a low table.

Azola walks over and peers inside the box. It contains half a dozen young leopard

tortoises, none of them bigger than his hand. The edges of their spotted carapaces tap against each other as they shuffle about the box.

‘You can pick any one you like,’ says Trilby. ‘We like to be helpful to foreigners here.’ He takes a drag of his cigar and directs a plume of dirty blue smoke at the ceiling. ‘If yours wins. You get to keep the whole pot, minus fifty for me.’

‘How much to play?’

‘A hundred dollars.’

Azola raised an eyebrow. ‘Per race?’

‘Too rich for your blood?’

It is almost the sum total of Azola’s remaining cash, but the rejuvenated confidence granted him by the soap is still strong, even though its scent is starting to fade. ‘Not at all,’ Azola replies. He pulls the notes out of his pocket and puts them on the table.

Trilby counts the money and gives a thumbs-up with the hand clutching his cigar. ‘Pick your racer.’

Azola picks up the smallest tortoise. Its domed, yellow carapace is marked with thick black spots and it jerks its head and legs deep into its shell as Azola lifts it out of the box.

‘Who else is in?’ Trilby asks the room.

Four men approach the box, each pulling out a tortoise after handing Trilby their money, which he places on the side of the table, minus his fifty. Azola can tell how hard they are trying to make the transaction look casual and unrehearsed.

A fifth man appears at the table, holding a tortoise that had not been in the box. It looks slightly bigger than the others and has a rust-coloured shell. Azola pretends not to notice; he picked up on the scam soon after entering the room. But he has a plan. He takes up his place at the table, in the outside left lane. Before he puts the tortoise down in its lane, he holds the front of its shell against his collar. The tortoise’s head emerges and it starts sniffing his neck.

‘Do you want to race it or kiss it?’ asks Trilby.

Azola puts the tortoise down on the table. It strains against his hand.

Trilby shouts *Go!* and the tortoises are released.

Azola's tortoise surges forward. It makes the others look as if they are out for a distracted stroll and it reaches the winning end of the table four lengths ahead of its closest, rust-coloured rival. His tortoise tears a chunk off the tired lettuce and starts chewing.

A stunned silence holds sway around the table while Azola picks up his winnings.

He holds out the fistful of notes to Trilby. 'I'll buy him from you.'

Trilby grinds his cigar out under his shoe. No trace of his earlier affability remains. 'You think you can run something like this?'

'I don't want to race him,' says Azola.

Trilby pushes Azola's hand back. 'No deal. This one shows champion potential. I thought he was a useless one, but maybe he's just a late bloomer.'

The winning tortoise, now finished with its lettuce and ignoring the slice of tomato, extends its neck and gazes up at Azola. He looks into its eyes and comes to a decision.

Azola grabs the tortoise and runs for the door.

He can hear their shoes striking the road not far behind him. They have not shouted or called out once since they started chasing after him, like a pair of hyenas hunting in the dark. This frightens Azola more than anything. He had made it out of the tortoise-racing room and through the club into the street without anyone stopping him, but he was only half a block away when Trilby and one of the bouncers burst out of the club entrance and started chasing after him.

The moon is out and close to full, allowing him to see well enough not to stumble, but Azola is keenly aware this also means his pursuers can easily keep sight of him.

He runs with the tortoise clutched against his chest. It watches him closely and has its nose pressed against his neck, sniffing him in short, whistling snorts. The scent of the soap on his skin is rapidly being replaced by the smell of panicked sweat and

Azola has no idea where he is headed. His asthma has returned and behind him, Trilby and the bouncer are gaining.

He jumps over a tree root that has ruptured the concrete pavement and runs around a corner. The narrow street leads to a tall, cracked wall encircling what used to be a private park. Decades of neglect have turned it into an overgrown wasteland.

The gates are long gone and Azola dashes inside. He dodges around mounds of rubble and runs to the far corner of the park, dominated by the crumbling remains of a fountain and a huge flame tree. A few green and yellow mosaic tiles still cling to the side of the fountain and the tree's branches cast deep shadows under the moonlight.

Azola goes down on his hands and knees next to the fountain. He puts the tortoise gently down on some patchy grass close to the flame tree's trunk.

'I hope this is better,' Azola whispers to the tortoise. The reproachful look the tortoise gives him as it shuffles off mirrors the doubt in his own voice. *But still, I did the right thing – didn't I?* The tortoise gives him a parting yawn and vanishes into the shadows. Behind him comes the sound of someone stumbling over debris and swearing.

Azola stands up and creeps along the park wall, trying to keep his raspy breathing in check. He comes to a tall mound of rubble piled high against the wall, offering a precarious escape route over the wall and out of the park. He picks his way carefully over the crushed stone and shattered glass, and makes it most of the way to the top when a half-brick smashes into the side of his knee.

'Not bad,' says Trilby to the bouncer next to him, 'But admit it, you were aiming for his head, weren't you?'

The bouncer makes no reply. The two men saunter up the mound to where Azola is sitting, hugging his knee to his chest.

Trilby looks over the edge of the wall, where a five-metre drop ends in a canal filled with dark and stagnant water. He grabs Azola by his shirt and yanks him to his feet. 'Where's my tortoise?'

'It's gone,' wheezes Azola.

Trilby pulls him closer until their noses are almost touching. He is about to say something to the bouncer, who has drawn a knife, when he catches the last trace of the soap's scent on Azola. Trilby releases his grip on Azola's shirt and searches through his pockets until he finds the winnings from the tortoise race. 'Be gone by tomorrow,' Trilby says, pocketing Azola's money. 'Maputo is no longer the place for you.'

Then he pushes Azola backward over the edge of the wall.

The splash as he hits the water sounds especially loud in the quiet night. Azola surfaces, sputtering and flailing his arms through the stinking, greasy canal. Moments later he realises the water only reaches up to his armpits. He wades to the embankment and pulls himself onto dry ground, where he collapses on his back. Azola glances up at the wall, expecting to see Trilby and the bouncer looking down at him, but they're gone.

The journey back to his hotel is long and painful. His brick-smashed knee throbs and objects every time he puts his weight on it, and the people he encounters wrinkle their noses at the canal-stink of him and hurry along. It takes ages before he can find anyone willing to stop and give him directions.

By the time he staggers through the entrance of the Hotel Última Parada

he has dried from wet to damp. The woman at reception has been replaced by a grey-haired man who stands up and looks ready to chase off the rank and limping figure when Azola produces his room key. 'I'm in room thirty-two,' he says.

The man sits down and raises an eyebrow. Azola leans against the reception desk to take the weight off his aching knee. 'The complementary soap. Do you have any more of it?'

The man pinches his nose and replies with a blank stare.

'I'll pay you,' says Azola. 'I don't have much money left, but I have some great alarm clocks. You can have all the stock in my case.'

The man pushes his chair back. 'Look at this place,' he says. 'We don't give complementary soap. Not for as long as I can remember, and I've worked here since the Portuguese left.'

Azola makes slow and painful progress up the stairs and to his room. He strips off his stinking clothes and steps into the shower. This time the water refuses to heat up and without any soap he has no choice but to wash with toothpaste. The minty freshness masks most of the canal water smell.

He collapses on the bed without drying himself off and drifts off to sleep next to his open case, filled with unwanted alarm clocks.

The last thing he does before closing his eyes is to grab the T-shirt he used as a towel earlier before he headed out. Azola drapes it over his nose. The scent of the soap on the shirt is faint, but it still lingers, and permeates his dreams. They are incredible.

## ***No Lost Property by Valentino Poppi***

**Winner of the XXVI Trofeo RiLL (2020)**

***Translated by Paul Virgo***

Engineer Bucchi parked his car in front of the big building, right at the beginning of the industrial park. He looked in confusion at the screen of his satnav, which confirmed that he had reached his destination. The building didn't look anything like a council office. But, now that he was there, he might as well ask for information.

As he entered, the sliding doors closed silently behind him. A young, blond man, impeccably dressed in a jacket and a tie, was sitting at a desk, focusing on his computer. As soon as he saw him, he stood up and gave him a warm welcome.

"Good morning, my name is Angelo. Can I help you?"

“Yes please... I'm looking for the lost-property office”.

“You're in the right place. What do you need?”

“Well... two days ago my wife lost her car keys on a bus and I'd like to know if they have been found. They told me at the bus station that they hand everything found on the vehicles to you”

“Oh, I'm afraid there has been a misunderstanding...” the man said, smiling. “You are looking for the city's found-property office. This is a business operation”.

The engineer was speechless for a moment.

“Didn't you just say that this is the lost-property office?”

“Yes, precisely. Our company works on commission to find anything that, in one way or another, has been lost”.

Bucchi studied the tranquil expression on the young man's face, unsure whether he was playing a joke on him.

“I understand your confusion. All our clients react this way the first time. Unfortunately, it's almost midday and the council office will close soon. You wouldn't get there in time and there's no guarantee that they've found your keys. If you want, we can take care of recovering them”.

“Oh, sure,” the engineer replied sarcastically. “I'm certain you have to pay in advance for the service”.

“Don't worry, you only pay on delivery. You don't even need to leave a deposit. The only thing you have to do is sign the authorization for us to search for the object and agree on the payment, which depends on the time within which you want the object to be returned. As soon as we have it at our disposal, we will contact you. Obviously, we have to protect ourselves, so our security is that, if the agreed payment is not made, everything that has been found will become the legal property of our company. What do you think?”

Bucchi was somewhat disorientated by the confidence of the person he was talking to about subjects that seemed devoid of logic.

“How can you be certain that you will be able to find an object you know nothing about? You could spend months looking for something that I have hidden on purpose”.

Angelo smiled smugly.

“I see you have understood how important it is that our business is conducted with extreme precision. These are business risks that we are willing to take. On the other hand, I cannot reveal our organizational strategies; what I can guarantee is that, up to now, we have found 98% of our clients' lost property. So, would you like to give it a try? I'll do you a quote for the keys and you'll be free to accept or not”.

Bucchi followed the man into a modern open-space area, where around 20 young employees were frenetically typing away on the keyboards of their computers. They approached the desk of a young woman.

“Excuse me, Bea, do you have time for a quote? This gentleman has lost a bunch of keys.”

“Certainly!” she answered, smiling. “Please take a seat,” she said pointing to a chair.

Angelo said goodbye and went back towards the entrance. Bucchi sat down, looking around warily. Everyone appeared extremely busy. He saw some geolocalization maps on some screens.

“So, can you describe what you lost?”

Bucchi looked at the young woman again, regretting having gotten involved in such an absurd situation.

“My wife lost her car keys two days ago. The garage key was with them. They were held together on a ring, without a key fob”.

“Very well, when do you want us to get them back to you?”

“But... don't you need to know anything else?”

“Don’t worry. It’s an object that’s easy to find and it has a purely commercial value, so a simple invoice is all that is needed for payment. I just need your details and those of your wife. If any other information is needed, the system will request it”.

Bucchi looked at the monitor of the computer that the request had just been inserted into.

“Ok, let’s make it the day after tomorrow,” he said to cut things short and end the conversation as soon as possible.

The woman inserted the date and pressed ENTER on the keyboard.

“The quote is three hundred and fifty euros”.

“What? I can get another copy from the showroom for a hundred and fifty!”

“Can I suggest setting a longer deadline? Look, if we insert next Monday as the date, the price comes down to one hundred and ninety euros, VAT included”.

“But... so I could ask to have them back within an hour”.

“Certainly, wait a moment... here you are. The price would be one million, three hundred thousand euros. But I don’t think it’s worth it. Besides, if you don’t pay, the keys will become our property.”

He stared mouth agape.

“Monday is fine...” he mumbled.

“Excellent. The system does not require any other information. Simply rest your hand on this scanner to confirm that you have accepted”.

Bucchi’s telephone rang right in the middle of the meeting for the closure of the quarterly reports. Irritated, he answered as the presenter continued to explain slides projected onto a big screen.

“Good morning engineer, it’s Angelo from the Lost Property company”.

Bucchi got even more annoyed. He had almost removed the recollection of the meeting of the week before, when he left the building in the industrial zone cursing to himself, from his mind. He’d felt duped about the wasted time and about the data he

had reluctantly given the employee. He would have bet that his number would be used improperly, for adverts or cold calls. He got up and left the meeting room for a moment.

“Listen, I’m in an important work meeting,” he whispered into his head-phones. “I don’t want to be disturbed again. I ask you to remove my personal details from your systems”.

“Certainly, I just wanted to inform you that your keys are ready and you can come and pick them up when you want. Then, if you want, we will delete your data from our files when we hand them over”.

Bucchi was silent for a moment.

“You’re telling me that you have found the keys I lost?”

“Exactly, as in the contract we signed”.

“I thought it was a call for a fund-raising or something like that”.

Angelo laughed into the telephone.

“Engineer, we are a serious company. Come by when you want, we are waiting for you.”

Astounded, Bucchi took hold of the keys, together with a freshly printed invoice, which generically referred to the *recovery and consignment of personal items*. There was no doubt about it, they were his wife’s keys.

“You look a little perplexed. Do you have any complaints about our service?” Angelo asked him.

“I don’t understand how you got them back”.

“As I said before, I cannot reveal our company strategies. Anyway, if you want, now we can remove your personal details from our systems, as you requested.

Bucchi thought about it for a while.

“Wait... are you able to find objects that were lost a long time ago?”

“We work on everything that has been lost in one way or another”.

“Years ago, while moving house, I lost a watch that my grandfather had given me. It wasn’t worth much, but it was important to me”.

“If the object is old and has sentimental value, the procedure is a little different,” the other man said, smiling. He typed something into the computer. “I’ll have your details taken to another office and set up the request. Follow me, let’s see what we can do.”

They went down a corridor that was different to the previous one and then they entered a strange room. Ten people of a certain age were sat down working at worn-out, impeccably tidy wooden desks, which had rotary-dial telephones and typewriters on them instead of cell phones and computers. A multitude of shelves on the walls full of old folders made the atmosphere similar to that of an office of the 1970s.

“Bob, did they bring you that file?” Angelo asked as he approached one of the employees.

“You know I don’t like those print outs” he answered in a grumpy tone. “Anyway, I’ve already checked and there shouldn’t be any trouble with the recovery. As long as the client accepts the fee,” he said, looking at Bucchi with suspicion. He stared back, a little worried.

“Would the figure be very high?” he asked, thinking to himself that he would be prepared to pay 2,000 euros, even though the watch was worth less than 20.

“We only accept payment in money for what has a purely commercial value,” Angelo replied as he read the typed-out form that Bob had just compiled.

“What we are interested in at the moment is something else. We think that you may have an object sought after by another client of ours. Do you recognize anything in this photo?” he asked as he showed him an old, yellowed photo worn away at the edges. A middle-aged person and a boy were holding a silver trophy, probably won in some sort of competition.

“But... that is the cup that my wife brought from a second-hand market two months ago. If I remember rightly, she paid almost 200 euros...”

“Very well then... the watch will be here within two weeks. We’ll give it to you in exchange for that object. All you have to do is sign this form to accept. Remember, though, that if you sign and you don’t make the payment, the watch will become our property”.

Bucchi took possession of his grandfather’s watch again more than 10 years after the last time he had worn it. When he put it on his wrist, he almost had tears in his eyes. Unfortunately, taking in the silver cup, which had no value to him, was somewhat complicated because of his wife. They argued all day when he explained that, without having asked her, he’d signed a contract that obliged him to hand it over. Anyway, even if he’d asked her beforehand, she would have refused to let him take it away.

“You don’t look totally satisfied this time either,” Angelo said after taking the silver trophy as payment.

“No, not at all,” replied the engineer, full of emotion. “Don’t misread my state of mind, your service is truly incredible. To be honest, I don’t know if I’m more scared by your efficiency or happy about having found my watch. Unfortunately, things have not been going as they should with my wife for some time, I had to argue with her for a long time to bring you the cup she had bought”.

The emotion of the moment led him, contrary to his every habit, to talk about personal issues with someone he hardly knew. A sad smile appeared on his face.

“It wasn’t enough to explain to her that I would have back an object that was very dear to me and that, at the end of the day, she could buy another ornament at any time. I haven’t been able to cut out any space for myself for years. Just think, I love basketball and we’ve got to the point that, just because she had decided to go out to dinner with friends, I missed this year’s championship final”.

Angelo’s smile changed slightly, becoming vaguely menacing.

“I told you that we work on everything that has been lost in one way or another. What do you say, would you like to get back a missed occasion?”

Bucchi suddenly got serious. He felt a strange disquiet make way inside him.

“I don’t understand... what do you mean?”

“Our firm also provides services that go beyond what we consider... let’s say... normal. Come, follow me.”

Angelo accompanied him to a part of the building that was furnished in a very strange way. Carpets on the floor, wallpaper and vintage furniture gave the space a very old look. If they’d said a building like this could have rooms like this inside, he wouldn’t have believed it. They entered a sort of office, where three old men were writing by hand in large ledgers of yellowed paper. Their clothes looked like those of the bookkeepers of the 1920s that he had seen in cop movies at the cinema. More identical ledgers were piled up tidily on some tables. The windows were small, so small that the amount of light that entered still left the room almost in semi-darkness. Small oil lamps, which illuminated the nearby shelves with their flickering flame, were on every table. The place was surreal to say the least.

“Wait a second” Angelo said quietly, then he approached one of the three men and started talking to him in a whisper. The man listened, then he took one of the ledgers from a table. They leafed through it together, then they closed it. Angelo returned to Bucchi.

“I knew there was a possibility,” he told him. “If you want, we can make it possible for you to go to the final you missed

“But... even if that were possible. I already know what happened... it wouldn’t be the same”.

“No, if I say you can see it, it will be played over again from the start. As long as you are willing to pay the price...”

“And... how much would it be?”

“It’s not a question of money, this time it regards... occasions. We know that you went on a cruise 15 years ago. Are you willing to give up your memories of that trip to someone who missed out on the opportunity to go?”

“But... what does that mean?” Bucchi asked, completely disorientated.

“It means that you agree to completely lose your memory of those days, as if you had never experienced them. In exchange, you will be able to attend the match.

What do you think? All you have to do is sign this ledger. In that case you can consider the payment to have been made immediately”.

Bucchi thought about that extremely boring holiday that his wife had forced him to go on many years ago. Before he realized what he was doing, he grabbed the pen and signed.

It took only a moment. The roar of the fans as the players were taking the court rocked the whole sports arena. He was in one of the best court-side seats as mayhem broke out around him. It only took him a few seconds to stand up and start shouting too, happier than he had been for years.

Bucchi woke up and found himself on a little, old couch. He sat up, confused. The last thing he remembered was celebrating like a madman when the last three-point shot won it for his team.

At that precise moment, Angelo appeared at the door. “So, how did the final go?”

Bucchi was taken by surprise.

“You made me jump, you walk extremely silently. Where am I? Can I sit here for a moment?”

“We are in one of the rooms next to the one where you signed. We always have them ready, so that our clients can use them when they need to. Don’t worry, if you want, you can rest some more. It’s all included in the agreed price. How do you feel?”

Bucchi thought about the joy he had felt at the end of the match and then tried to compare it with the memories of the cruise he went on with his wife. Not even one came to mind. It was as if everything that had happened, from embarking to getting off the ship, had never existed.

“Fine, I’d say. I hadn’t had so much fun in all the time since I got married 25 years ago”.

Angelo laughed.

“Excuse me if I ask, but in that case, why did you get married?”

“It’s a very sad story, I don’t know if you’d like to hear it...”

“Well, we have a little time, why not?”

He tried to move around and stretch a little. He felt completely stiff.

“I had a girlfriend at university. Her name was Alice. At the time, she was one of the few women to do engineering. One evening after the lessons, I had to stay at the faculty to speak to a lecturer. We said goodbye to each other, she set off for home on her own and that was the last time I saw her. When she was at the bus stop, a truck driver had a bad turn, ran off the road and crashed into the bus shelter. Six people died, including the driver, who’d passed away even before causing the accident. I was devastated, so much so that I sought comfort in the first woman I met, without thinking about whether she was right for me. And that’s how I met my wife. We got married as soon as I found a job after university. Alice was the biggest loss of my life”.

Angelo stared at him with a smile on his face, without saying a word. Bucchi stared back, feeling fear gradually building up inside him and, within moments, it turned to tremendous terror.

“Oh no... don’t even try to propose something like that to me!”

“I’d already told you that we work on everything that has been lost in one way or another. Feel free to take as long as you like to think about it”.

At that moment, in Bucchi’s mind he realised the enormity of what was happening to him. He felt the shock of the abyss of madness that he had started to fall into with the recovery of the keys and which he would not be able to re-emerge from unless he left immediately.

“Let me out of here at once.”

“Certainly, if you feel all right, I’ll accompany you to the entrance”.

He followed Angelo through the corridors to the entrance of the building. Only then did he realise that his footsteps made no sound.

The sliding opened silently before them. Bucchi stopped at the threshold, looking at the road in front of him. He stayed there, not moving, for a while.

“How much would it cost me,” he asked in a low voice, continuing to stare straight ahead of himself.

“You have already grasped our company’s policy. The more precious the thing that has been lost, the higher the price to pay. What do you think is the thing with the highest value that you have to offer and that someone else could want?”

Horrible visions of pacts with the devil that would condemn him for eternity passed through his mind.

“Perhaps... my soul?”

“Don’t get carried away, engineer. Remember that we are a business. The soul undoubtedly has immense value, but it is too hard to sell, given that it is of interest only to two Entities, who we cannot ask anything in exchange from. Time is the thing that people lose most in the world. And that is what you can give us.”

“My time?”

“Yes, what’s left of it. I can get back what you lost, but, at that point, you could no longer live in this reality as you know it. So all the time that you still had to pass would be lost definitively. If you accept, you can give it to us as payment.”

Bucchi found himself sat in the Engineering faculty’s big lecture hall as the electronics teacher was finishing his lesson. It took him a few seconds to realize where he was. The memories of what had happened just before came back one at a time.

He remembered Angelo leading him to a dark room where a man dressed like a friar was writing with a quill and an ink pot on parchments in candle light. He had pressed his blood-stained finger at the bottom of one of these and everything went black. When he could see again, he was there.

He slowly turned to his left, consumed by fear that he wouldn’t see her. Instead, Alice was sat there right next to him. She was sorting her books out in her bag.

“See you tomorrow” she said serenely.

He froze, overwhelmed by the emotion.

“Wait...” he replied, catching her arm with his hand as she was about to go. She turned around, smiling.

“What is it? You seem a bit strange. Did the lesson stress you out?”

“No... I’ll come with you. I’ll accompany you”.

“Come on... you’ll make me miss the bus. Didn’t you have to talk about your thesis with your tutor?”

He looked at his grandfather’s watch in his wrist.

“It’s early, let’s walk. I’ll see the prof tomorrow.”

She looked perplexed, with her girlish expression, then she smiled again.

“All right, let’s go”.

The inspector arrived at the Lost Property company three days later. As soon as he went through the main entrance, Angelo welcomed him warmly.

“Good morning, how can I help you?”

“Hello, can you tell me if you issued this invoice?” the policeman asked, showing him the receipt Bucchi signed for the recovery of the keys.

Angelo took a quick look. “Certainly, it’s from a few weeks ago, for services regarding the recovery of personal items”.

“Did you meet this client again?”

“Yes. Three days ago, when he passed by to pick up a watch. He hasn’t been around since.”

“Did he behave strangely when he was here?”

“Not at all. He seemed like the happiest person in the world”.

“His car was found near here. All trace of this man was lost three days ago.”

Angelo smiled.

“Then you have come to the right place. Our company deals with everything that has been lost in one way or another...”

*Valentino Poppi was born in 1968 in Bologna, where he lives with his family. A graduate in electronic engineering, he works in the telecommunications sector.*

*He has been writing stories for several years and several of them have won (or reached the final) of literary competitions for speculative fiction and/or have been published in anthologies.*

*In particular, he won the XXIII Trofeo RiLL with “In Front of the Mirror” (which came first out of the 350 stories submitted; already published on PROBE 182) and the XXVI Trofeo RiLL with “Lost Property” (which came first out of the 430 stories submitted). Moreover, in 2018 his science fiction short-story “Questioni d’onore” (Matter of Honour) was one of the three finalists for the Urania Short prize, run by Urania (Italy’s top science-fiction magazine).*

*His novel “Vizi e tentazioni” (Vices and temptations) was published by Robin Edizioni, and previously it was finalist for the Urania prize, run by Urania. In 2021, RiLL edited a collection of his best short stories, named “Via d’uscita” (Way Out) and published by Acheron Books.*

*The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding speculative-fiction writers. The contest has been run since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a non-profit club based in Rome. Each year the Trofeo RiLL features around 300-350 short-story participants, from Italy and other countries. The winning entries are annually published in MONDI INCANTATI, anthologies that are edited and published directly by RiLL.*

*The Trofeo RiLL final awards ceremony takes place at Lucca Comics & Games, Italy’s most important festival for festival of comics, illustration, speculative fiction, games and animation, which since forever patronizes the Trofeo RiLL.*

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# Nova Finalist 2021

## Deon Schneider Eternity

I don't know what dead of night means to you, but 2 am when the phone rang must be pretty damn close in anybody's language. At that time in the morning it would be either Pete to tell me we'd won the lottery, or someone had died. It was neither. It was Ryan Lucas, and it was a call I had hoped never to get.

“Hey Don, did I wake you?”

Stupid question, right? Of course it's stupid, but there really is no other way for someone to start a bad news call in the dead of night, and Ryan was no exception. Silence stretched for the longest 5 seconds of my life, but that was okay, I didn't really want him to carry on. I mean, if nobody says anything then nothing will have happened, right? It couldn't last of course and didn't, but then the oddest thing happened. When he eventually did speak, my ears seemed to be playing tricks, because it wasn't Ryan at all. This sod of a stranger said something like, “listen buddy, there's been an accident.” Now why would someone you don't know phone you in the dead of night pretending to be your friend, and then want to give you bad news? I don't understand cranks like that. Inconsiderate sick bastard!

By now my mind was fluttering around like butterfly in a South Easter, trying vainly to find solid ground. I was lost in the chaos of denial, and a tightening band around my chest was squeezing the breath from my body. I tried to take a deep breath, but all I got was somewhere between a sob and a shudder. I had lost the power of speech, but words, so many words with nowhere to go, skittered aimlessly through whatever rational part of my consciousness was still operating. “Don?” It must have been the heartbreak in the voice that did it because, just like that, the stranger vanished and Ryan was back in my life.

I swallowed bile. “What ... happened?”

He told me. I wished he hadn't.

•

Three minutes is all it took from the apartment, into my car, and on to the highway. To hell with speed limits. Not at this time of the morning, and certainly not in my present chaotic state of mind. Catch me if you can!

•

I'm not a romantic dreamer or a maundering philosopher, but I can tell you quite categorically that my life proper started with the power of William Blake's imaginative poetry.

*To see a world in a grain of sand  
and a heaven in a wild flower  
hold infinity in the palm of your hands  
and eternity in an hour*

Okay, I'll admit up front that I appreciated it for all the wrong reasons. I could sense there was something special in that quatrain the day I first read *Auguries of Innocence*; by accident I might add, because somewhere in my juvenile mind the title hinted at a smattering of lechery. But, here's some good advice; if you ever get round to reading it, stop after those first 4 lines because the rest, unless you're a tree hugging, world saving, crusader, is just downright frivolous.

But wow, those opening lines are magic. You know how us guys all like to show the opposite sex just how smart and sensitive and worldly we are, so you would think, at least I did, that quoting a few lines of meaningful poetry while staring soulfully into a girl's eyes would lead to something more than just holding hands, and ... well, in a roundabout way I suppose it did, but not in the way you might think. Let me tell you how that worked out for me.

•

Apart from some squabbling seagulls, the beach was pretty empty at that time of day as I scooped up a handful of sand and, scrunching up my eyes for a more soulful effect, I dribbled it through my fingers as I made my poetic seduction pitch with Blake's dramatic opening quatrain. Thankfully only a few of the nearby seagulls looked our way as her rich throaty laugh stopped me from making an even bigger

fool of myself. "Don't be ridiculous Don, do you even understand what words like infinity and eternity mean?" And just like that I was hopelessly in love.

That was then and this is now.

It's a now where one word has come back to haunt me. One very relevant word that keeps repeating in my brain with the metronomic timing of a dripping tap ... *eternity ... eternity ... eternity ... eternity.*

It's a word that has linked me to the love of my life from the moment she saw through my pathetic attempt to impress her. But somewhere in the past minute it went from being a thing of mystical grandeur penned by a long dead poet, to a reality that I think only someone faced with the fragile mortality of human life can truly appreciate.

•

It was the second day of our honeymoon, and the waiter with the irritatingly knowing smile had just brought us a pair of outrageously pink touristy drinks topped with the obligatory little plastic umbrellas, when her phone rang.

Phone calls have played a part in all the seminal moments in my life ... like on my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday when my first girlfriend broke up with me. Actually her mother phoned my mother, but the outcome was the same ... like when I was 15 and Mom phoned to tell me I had been accepted at the tennis academy ... like when I was 18 and there was a message on the answering service congratulating me on being selected for our Davis Cup squad ... like on my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday when Jenna phoned to say yes.

Three days earlier we had gone to her favourite restaurant. Nothing fancy you understand, she was a seafood and salad kind of girl. But it was a special kind of night nevertheless, because straight after we'd shared the last piece of calamari I asked her to marry me. Well, not in so many words because, no matter how many times I'd replayed this special moment in my mind, the 3 year old memory of my failed seduction attempt on the beach kept coming back to taunt me. So I didn't do the bended knee thing, I simply looked her in the eye and slid the ring across the

table. She held my stare, those violet eyes crinkling slightly at the corners, and simply simply slid it back at me with that strange little quirky smile that left you stuck in no-man's land. To this day I've never figured out what that smile means.

“No!”

“No?”

“Great idea,” the smile broadened, “just bad timing.”

“C'mon, a simple yes will do nicely.”

“You know I'm defending my thesis in three days my love. If there's a revise, your proposal's off the table. Either way I'll call.”

“What if there's no revise?” No answer, just that smile.

Well, she did call, and her thesis did cream it, and there was no revise, and she did say yes. My best phone call ever.

Oh yes, I've neglected to mention that she was one of the smartest people I'd ever met. An astrophysicist with a particular fondness for stellar evolution. Her PhD thesis dealt with some obscure stars called Mira variables. Once, early on in our relationship, she had tried to explain her fascination with the life cycles of these giant, pulsating stars, and how life and everything we see around us had their birth in some or other stellar melting pot. I didn't even try to keep up, because my high school physics left me, at best, with only a rudimentary understanding of how our own sun managed to keep on shining, so it was pretty much a lost cause. It did however highlight the immense gulf that existed between our understanding of things. There we were, both blessed with a singular talent, it's just that they happened to be poles apart. I could play tennis better than most wannabes, and she had an IQ that could make your eyes water. I didn't see the problem, and thankfully neither did she

Early on in our relationship, sort of just past the holding hands stage, she came to watch me play in a tournament. I won, but that wasn't what impressed her. She was intrigued by the way you could make the ball swerve and dip through the air just by altering the racquet angle to impart spin. Now any idiot who's ever

picked up a racquet or a bat can explain it in one sentence, but oh no, not her. Physics was involved and so of course that turned it into a discussion topic. In that precise school marmy way she had of dealing with the great unwashed, she went into great detail about coefficients of spin. So I smiled and must have made all the right noises, because she took that to mean that I was interested. This was a big mistake, because she then went on at length explaining the murky world of vectors. Just another perfect illustration of how differently our brains were wired.

Anyway, so there we were, lazing in our private bubble of sun, sea and slow metabolism, when technology found a way to break the spell. Her phone rang.

Her side of the conversation went something like this; “yes this is Mrs Taylor ... oh hi Ryan ... no I'm not busy,” looks at me, winks, and blushes that special morning after the night before shade of rosy pink reserved for new brides ... “that's ... that's wonderful Ryan ... when ... uh, I see ... no, no, it won't be a problem. Goodbye.”

She didn't look up immediately, took her time to put the phone down, but when she did, that enigmatic quirky smile made her eyes crinkle, but this time there was no humour in it. There was an edge of ... what ... I couldn't decide ...

excitement, trepidation, challenge? And then she let the hammer down. “I'm going to the sun.”

That's what she said. Just like that. “I'm going to the sun.” And, as I watched that selfsame slowly setting tropical sun refracting the condensation on our chilled glasses into miniature rainbow jewels, you know what, I couldn't think of a single thing to say. There I was, my wife of just two days telling me she was going to take a trip to the sun, and I couldn't think of a single damn thing to say. Me, the guy with a reputation for clever repartee just sat there squinting at that 150 million kilometre away old fireball, waiting for inspiration. Flippancy didn't seem quite the right way to go, but then again neither did solemnity, because that just wouldn't be me. So I just sat there trying to unscramble my brain, while my wife waited ... and waited ... and waited.

You know how sometimes you replay a situation in your head, and you come up with all sorts of smart things you wished you'd said and didn't because, for

whatever reason, you had a temporary brain freeze. Well, I did what any self respecting tongue-tied newbie husband would have done, I played for time. “Hmm ... uh ...,” and picking up my umbrella decorated drink, I nonchalantly made a show of squinting at the sun, while pensively having a sip of the ridiculously sweet concoction. Desperately I scratched around inside my brain for inspiration ... nope, I had nothing, and so I just blurted out a strangled version of what bobbed uppermost in my mind. “When?”

“They want me at the launch centre day after tomorrow. I'll be doing a fast track 10 day training programme, and then it's a 73 day trip. All indications are that the sun will be going through a quiescent phase at that time, and we'll be able to get up really close to check out an anomalous sunspot sequence that's getting everybody very excited.” She smiled, a genuine one this time. “Be happy for me Don” and lifted her glass in a toast to the setting sun.

I squinted at the tropical sun that was now streaking the edges of low lying clouds in hues of orange and scarlet, and you know what ... I didn't like it. No longer a giver of life, I saw it for what it really was. Just an uncaring massive ball of nuclear fire radiating death and destruction at anything or anybody that didn't keep a respectful distance. Icy fingers of apprehension tickled up and down my spine. I looked across the rim of my glass at my wife and, trying as best I can not to show my feelings, joined her in the toast.

•

I squealed my car's tyres into the parking lot, narrowly missing the night watchman as he jumped frantically out of the way. Stalling the engine in my haste to get out, the car lurched forward smashing one of the headlights against a no parking sign. So give me a parking ticket at your peril! The rampant adrenaline pumping through my system had shortened the usual forty minute drive in the morning traffic from the rented B & B we had moved into to be closer to the Solar Control Centre to just 12 minutes. I was ready to break more stuff if it got in my way

Ryan looked like he hadn't slept in weeks as I barged into the Control Centre. This was no time for pleasantries, and his first terse words reflected that. "I'll play the recording."

Captain Armstrong's voice, straining its way through the static, was matter of fact. "Okay guys, we have a problem. Got swatted by a massive flare that came out of nowhere, and the heat spike fused the ship's refrigeration unit. Internal temperature rising exponentially, and Hal estimates we have at most 20 minutes to repair the system before reaching lethal temperature. We're powering away from the sun with both engines at boost velocity, but without refrigeration we estimate it will be at least 33 minutes before reaching a safe temperature zone. So, no contest, we're on the wrong side of the equation by about 13 minutes ... we either repair in time or it's going to get very toasty in here. I ... ah ... got to go guys ... talk to you again on the other side of this." There was a loud crackle of static and then, very faintly, the words awash with hissing energy, "wish us luck guys." The radio went dead.

"What's the story Ryan, how long?" I needed to know ... I didn't want to know.

Ryan looked across to one of the young technicians and nodded. The kid tapped at his keyboard, and numbers started scrolling across his screen. "Okay, at that broadcast position the transmission time lag was exactly 8 minutes 23 seconds, so let's see ... hmmm ... the captain's message came through 17 minutes and 45 seconds ago so, if the repair was successful and let's say it took all of the 20 minutes for the repair, they'll now be safe." He hesitated, glancing across at me. "But we'll only know one way or the other in ... uh ... ," he pressed something on his keypad and a large digital countdown clock brightened into life against the far wall, "2 minutes 15 seconds and counting." He shook his head as if to get rid of something unpleasant. He looked at Ryan, "jeez boss, this is a classic Schrödinger's cat situation."

"Shut the fuck up Jones."

"Just saying."

"Don't ... just ... don't." Ryan's words squeezed out between clenched teeth.

Eternity can mean many things to many people ... the condemned man waiting for the trapdoor to open ... the sprinter waiting for the starter's gun ... and then there's me.

The thing about having just a little more than 120 seconds and counting before having to confront that moment when your life may irrevocably change forever, is the way it focuses your mind. Makes you revisit long forgotten things that lurk around in your subconscious just waiting for the right moment to zap you. Looking up at the big digital clock impersonally counting down the remaining seconds of my life in large luminous red numbers, a bit of philosophical doggerel composed during my 'search for meaning' teenage years flitted for no reason at all through my mind.

*A .. tick .. a .. tock*

*there is no clock*

*that will not time the passing of your day*

*no path of life that will not mark*

*the footsteps of your way*

*So hurry boy cause time flies by*

*and time that's gone is time goodbye*

*so do*

*don't do*

*it's up to you*

Implacably the countdown scrolled to 01.59.00.

119 seconds to go.

My eternity started.

# Nova 2021 Finalist

## Gary Kuyper Hive Mind

*And crawling on the planet's face  
some insects called the human race  
Lost in time and lost in space  
...and meaning*

*Richard O'Brien*

Television sets and monitors around the world flickered to life. Even those that weren't connected to a power source produced an image that was incredibly clear and sharp; an image of a discernibly uneasy Dexter Bumstead.

"Uh, good day, all." He gave a nervous cough. "And good evening to those of you on the other side of the planet." He gazed about in bewilderment. "I don't know how they're doing this as there are no cameramen or even television cameras present. In fact, apart from my cat, Dinkles, I'm pretty much all alone here in my apartment. But I digress from my duty, so let me get to the point.

"The...Swarm have asked...suggested that I be their spokesman to help clear up some misunderstandings. I, although somewhat reluctantly, have agreed to help out.

"Where to begin? Erm, well, some blame SETI; others have said it was probably the Voyager crafts that made the aliens aware of our existence. The truth is that The Swarm, as we have come to call them due to their insectoid...wasp-like appearance, have known about Earth and Humankind for thousands of years. In fact, they're not the only ones...out there who know about us.

“How do I know this? Because they have allowed me to be a part of their group consciousness or...hive mind, if you will.

“Why? Because they sensed in me a certain...peace and... contentment; a lack of self-importance, aggression and...undue ambition. Yes, strangely enough, having a deficiency of those human...qualities has somewhat endeared me to them. You see, these virtues, that our society has nurtured and taught us to pursue with much vigour and commitment, are quite abhorrent to The Swarm; they consider them unfriendly and ultimately destructive. Nationalism, patriotism and competition are all big no-nos.

“The majority of us love to point fingers at the arrogance and atrocities of the Third Reich, but in truth most of us have a little Hitler inside just waiting for the right opportunity to stick its ugly head out. Instead of thinking, ‘Variety is the spice of life,’ we hate what is different and mock, abuse and exploit the weak and less intelligent.

“You might judge me to be dull and boring, but I’m happy and contented. I enjoy good food and music and stimulating conversation; I admire the tranquillity of a beautiful sunset and relish in awe at the power of a magnificent thunderstorm. I could spend all day telling you of my likes...and dislikes, but no, I won’t bore you.

“Basically I’m a ‘live and let live’ kinda person. I always say, ‘Hell, let people do their thing as long as it isn’t causing harm or inconvenience to others...or the planet.’ Trouble is, most of the time someone or something is getting hurt by selfish and inconsiderate actions. For someone to be a winner, someone else has to be a loser. Yes, win-win situations are possible but very rare.

“At a time when the-powers-that-be (now referred to as ‘The-powers-that-were’) should have been rejoicing in the fact that the enemy’s missiles were rendered impotent, they were more upset...infuriated and anxious at the fact that their own warheads had failed to detonate over the myriad of designated targets.

“We live...lived in a mad world. M A D - Mutually Assured Destruction. Yes, those...madmen with the power would rather have seen all...everything blown to hell before submitting or admitting to defeat. ‘Cut off the nose - spite the face; push the button - end the human race.’

“Most people don’t even know that the human race was almost run...on the verge of extinction. So now they view The Swarm as tormentors instead of saviours.

“I hold no contempt, malice or derision to those naive people – it’s not in my nature – another reason The Swarm have chosen me to be their spokesman.

“You may think I’ve been threatened, coerced or even brainwashed (Taking into account their superior intellect and technology) into bringing you this message of hope and enlightenment, but I assure you that all I say is true - so listen up.

“The Swarm are empaths with a hive mind. This means that not only are they able to read the minds of other species but they are also able to share that information, almost instantaneously, with the rest of The Swarm. This became evident to me one day as I was taking an early evening stroll. There were a number of The Swarm milling about in small groups all up and down the street. A man, who was walking about twenty paces in front of me, suddenly pulled a long-barrelled shotgun from beneath his large coat and advanced with very noticeable, malicious intent towards one of the groups. Almost immediately every single Swarm on the street turned their attention towards the man. It was as if some loud report or warning siren, heard only by The Swarm had resounded. In an instant The Swarm...swarmed the man. They moved with uncanny speed and precision. For about half a minute the man was blocked from my view by the myriad of Swarm bodies.

“When The Swarm moved away I expected to see the man’s corpse lying on the street. But no, he was just standing there dumbfounded, unharmed. His weapon lay on the ground. It had miraculously been disassembled and lay in several pieces about his feet.

“The Swarm all returned to their little groups and proceeded as if nothing significant had transpired. It was as if some concerned parents had removed a pair of potentially harmful scissors from a toddler and were now content to get back to, and carry on with, their important adult activity.

“At first the man began picking up the parts of his dismantled weapon, but after a short while he cast them down again. Then, with an appearance of great dejection, he ambled off past me, back the way he had come. I know now that many similar incidents have occurred all around the world. But at that particular moment I decided to test a theory of mine...a supposition.

"I picked up the heavy barrel of the shotgun. It would make a formidable club. I advanced on the nearest group with the weapon raised above my right ear. They never budged.

"I stood there for a minute in that antagonistic stance. Still the group remained...unmoved. It would be a simple matter now to swing the club down and crush one of the bulbous heads. I swung hard and violently but halted the arc of the weapon just inches above the compound eye of the nearest alien. Still the group remained unstirred.

"I threw the barrel down. My theory had proven true. Without any true violent or antagonistic thoughts towards these beings they had not felt even a hint of fear, concern or anxiety. And it was also at that very moment that I felt the joining occur - becoming part of their hive mind. Prior to this I had always considered myself to be a man of peace and contentment. How very wrong I was. For only now did I experience true peace and a sense of total fulfilment.

"It is difficult to explain the sensation. The Swarm don't use any form of language. And to say I understood it all through imagery would be a gross understatement. I was flooded with a myriad of experiences and emotions. The rate at which the information was, and still is being passed to me is carefully controlled and monitored. It's almost similar to being in a large hall with various groups discussing different topics. But if you concentrate on listening to a single conversation then the rest of the hubbub becomes white noise whilst the one you're interested in becomes discernible, clear, lucid...logical. It was a profound and moving experience; I found myself wanting to laugh and weep at the same time.

"I was amazed at the absence of all negative sensations and emotions. No anger. No hatred. No envy. No contempt. No derision. No malice. And, most importantly, no lies. All is truth within the hive. There is no scheming...no secrets. And without trying to sound too soppy or sentimental, you could say that the most powerful emotion experienced was one of love. And I'm not talking about some warm, fuzzy, butterflies in the stomach feeling. I'm talking about action; doing the right thing at the right time for those in need. And that is exactly what happened to us...to humankind. How inappropriate the term humane now sounds, especially since our saviours are far from human or even humanoid.

“It is understandable why most humans still loath, despise and fear The Swarm. After all, they do bear a resemblance to the smaller creatures here on earth that cause us fear and pain. You might ask, ‘How do The Swarm consider our physical appearance?’ You will be surprised to know that they have no prejudiced conceptions regarding the physical...outer shells of other organisms – it is the mind that concerns them.

“You would probably regard the ability to know the minds... thoughts of others as an intrusion of privacy, but it is the way they have been raised since hatchlings. Consider that all have access to aeons of knowledge. There are no...can never be any lies, deception or half truths. Any negative thoughts are swiftly identified and quelled.

“And if the thought of a hive-mind is abhorrent to you, then know this: The Swarm’s near-limitless knowledge has given them the advantage of uncanny foresight...a reliable comprehension of being able to predict the future with unerring accuracy. And it is their...opinion that if humankind does not destroy itself first, that it too will come to develop a hive mind.

“So, is that scary and disconcerting or comforting and uplifting?

“Some of you may put forward that we are already experiencing a hive mind state with the internet and our electronic devices that are able to connect us socially or otherwise, and do it almost instantaneously as well. But, as I have already mentioned, in The Swarm’s collective consciousness there is no, nor can there ever be, lies, half truths or deception of any kind.

“You may also surmise that a hive mind would stifle creativity, but the opposite is true. A group consciousness means that no single entity can patent and monopolize on an idea or invention.

“You may also think that it reeks of communist idealism, which has proven many times to be a failed dogma due to its imperfection caused by human...imperfection. But note that, in The Swarm community, problems are swiftly identified and therefore also resolved.

“Also, reflect on what one of our own great minds admitted. Isaac Newton once stated, ‘If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.’ So,

contemplate the potential of an entire species that is hatched...born to be borne upon the shoulders of countless giants - the myriad of great minds that preceded them. The capacity...capability for incredible intellect is staggering...mind blowing. It is no wonder that they have been able to achieve such fantastic technological advancement that makes our inventions seem archaic and near-obsolete.

“How did they stop the nuclear holocaust? How did they manage to arrive here on earth in such great number without the apparent use of any spaceships? And how are they able to make my face appear simultaneously on every screen around the globe? I don’t know...yet. After all, I am but a babe...an infant amongst the many superior ...adult minds of the group consciousness.

“What? Hmm. Typical!” Dexter shook his head. “It would appear that there are those who would love to get a hold of me once I have such knowledge. They believe it could give them a significant advantage over their enemies.” Dexter shook his head again. “Fools and bairns! I guess some people never learn, even after having burnt their fingers numerous times. In truth, the only enemy you have is your own fear...or should I say fears as you have so many.

“But know this fact, the missiles were already flying when they decided to step in and help (not interfere as some of us might infer) to prevent a terrible cataclysm.

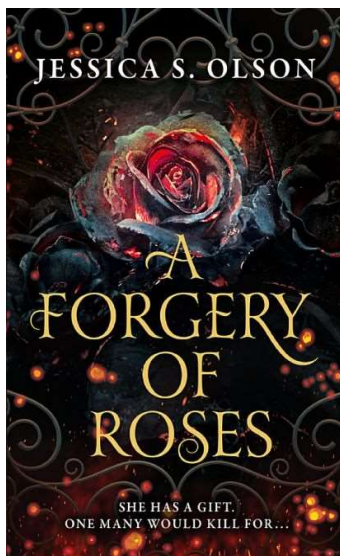
“Some of you will be pleased to note that our...saviours intend to leave once they have managed to put in place necessary precautions to prevent a similar incident from occurring.

“Truth be told, they are looking forward to leaving the Earth as being around humans too long might...taint the hive mind.

###

## Book Review Gail Jamieson

Jessica S. Olson *A Forgery of Roses*



This novel is noted as HarperCollins UK children, by JonathanBallPublishers. However I would consider it to be aimed a little higher than children, maybe Young Adult would be more accurate.

Be that as it may – this is a fast paced entertaining novel which starts off very well. But from my point of view it is a pity that it “degenerates” into a love story as it moves towards the finale.

Myra Whitlock is a portrait artist who is able to use magic in portraits she creates.

She is able to use her magic to cure small injuries as she paints her pictures. And this gets her into trouble. It is against religious doctrine to use magic. Her mother and father have both disappeared and she is left with the task of caring with her younger sister, who has a mysterious debilitating disease.

She is begged by the governor’s wife to try to bring her dead son back to life. Myra knows she should not attempt this but the offer of a great deal of money, which she could use for a doctor for her sister, persuades her to try.

She is collected by August, who turns out to be the older brother of the dead Will and taken to the governor’s villa where roses bloom in the dead of winter. And it soon appears that Will may have been murdered

The story gets more complicated by the presence of Vincent, whom she goes to, to get more of the supplies that she needs for her painting. And even more complicated when she tries to use her talents to help her sister who has taken a turn for the worse

She does not know who is actually whom they claim to be and she becomes increasingly tired and confused as the novels continues.

And then when it looks as if the novel is coming to a climax, it turns into a love story and we find that there will be a second episode.

This is a cleverly written novel with a good idea as its underlying premise but I was disappointed at the ending.

## L.O.C Lloyd Penney

1706-24 Eva Rd Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2 September 6, 2022

Dear SFFSAns:

It is the day after Labour Day here in Canada, but it is a fairly typical day for us, and there is finally the time to catch up with writing. I have here issues 191 and 192 of Probe...which I received just over the last couple of weeks. The international posts seem to be getting worse for getting the mails going, especially to me. Still, I will try to 191...

It's good to see that not only with your contacts in Italy, you now have some contacts in Nigeria. Perhaps the following information could be forwarded not only to SA writers, but to Nigerian writers, too. I am currently the copyeditor for Dreamforge Magazine, in the US, and they will be opening a window for submissions between get a letter ready so I won't miss issue 193.

September 22 and October 15. Get your stories in!

<https://dreamforgemagazine.com/call-for-submissions/> for all details.

We have had a hot summer here, but not like in some areas of the USA, where temperatures in many areas approached 50 degrees C, which is quite dangerous. We are on the brink of autumn, but today was our first chilly day.

Good to see more good writing in the Nova competition. I think we have a soft spot in our SFnal hearts for time machines, the *deus ex machina* to advance the plot quickly, but still, an item of curiosity ever since Asimov and his friends put forth the idea to tantalize us. The idea of a time traveller come forth from the era of Queen Victoria to warn those of the present day sounds quite steampunk in my mind, and steampunk has been a real interest of mine for more than 10 years now. Using the appearance of Oumuamua about five years ago now provides the perfect launching pad for the story. Would the appearance of the time traveller change the timeline? The slacker journalist is asking all the right questions, the time traveller is suitably Victoria in his speech and harrumphing, and then all happens as predicted. Still, an enjoyable story, and there are professional markets for stories like these. I have to

admit, I would certainly like a self-illuminating Daguerre refractor crystal from 1848...

My loc...from December of last year. Yes, we did have cold temperatures then, but in the intervening months...well, we have had a hot summer. Today is the first day of school for the kids; their summer vacation is done, while the rest of us can enjoy some summer without them around. We have had a busy year with vending, I've been busy with editing books and magazines, and as stated above, doing some editing with Dreamforge Magazine. We are also fully vaccinated, two shots plus two boosters, and if there are more shots to come, they may be part of our yearly influenza shot. We may feel like pincushions, but there is also a measure of peace of mind. Thousands die of COVID-19 regularly (tough to know what is happening, the news sources have dried up), but I intend to survive this.

Beyond the Bay is also a good read, showing that even extraordinary powers are dealt with in sexist attitudes. It is a little predictable in how it goes, but the ending seems to have punishments for all.

A little personal journalism...we've spent a lot of this summer vending at assorted conventions and shows, selling our steampunk jewelry and Hawaiian-style shirts, and sales have been phenomenal. So good, we're lining up more shows to see about increasing sales, and moving as much merchandise as we can. I admit to being a little depressed at not being able to go to many conventions this time of year, when so many of them are happening, but we have had to change our fan activities. Still, we hope to meet up with some friends at other events.

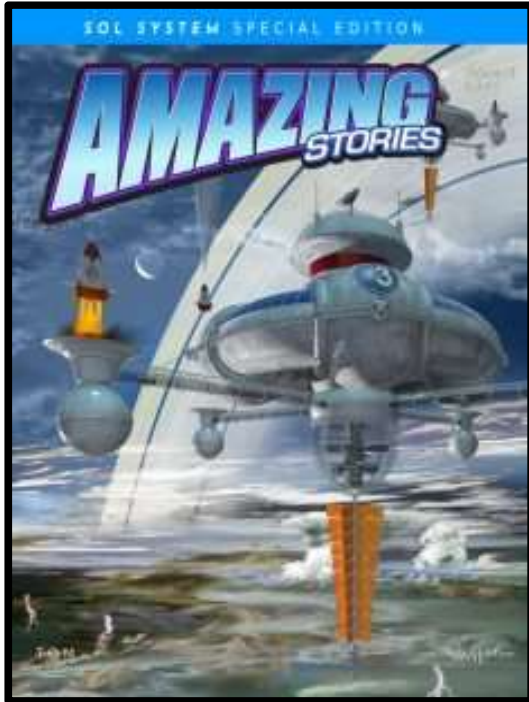
192... Keep going with international contacts. More than ever, we need to get together to enjoy fandom and SF together, but it is much more expensive to travel so we can gather. I am at the point where I think I have had one too many Zoom meetings, but I do see where Zoom can help us assemble while reducing our carbon footprint.

I am glad you have such positive Torcon 3 memories. I think my own experiences with Torcon put me off Worldcons for good. They were largely negative, and we stopped going to Worldcons after the 2011 Worldcon in Reno. We just can't afford them anymore.

Contaminated...it's the usual specials vs. normal story. There is a hint of magic in it, but after attempting to read it twice, I went onwards. Sorry, that's just me... But then, Planet of Boulders comes along, and I very much enjoyed it. Size does matter, especially in this tale. It also reminds me of an old Twilight Zone episode, plus The Integral Trees by Larry Niven.

Time to send it out, it's taken me most of the day to do this. Thank you for both these issues, I hope this will help flesh out issue 193. See you soon. *(Sorry –it got held over to PROBE 194 – Gail)* Yours, Lloyd Penney.

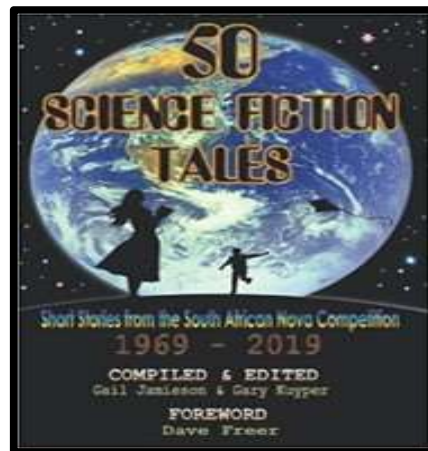
## And hot off the presses.....



Hello! Lloyd Penney here, the new editor-in-chief of Amazing Stories! We are now pleased to announce that submissions for **flash fiction** for our special next issue are open! That special issue? That's our Amazing Stories: Sol System special edition. We are interested in stories set in the future and revolving around Sol, including planets, moons, asteroids, Oort and Kuiper, you name it! Now that you know what we need, we need stories, flash fiction-sized, about 1500 words maximum, with a deadline of January 2nd, 2023. We are paying the SFWA 8 cents per word. Can't wait to see what you submit.

<https://submission.amazingstoriesmag.com/>

AND.....



[https://www.amazon.com/50-Science-Fiction-Tales-Competition-ebook/dp/B0BH4WHC9M/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?crid=2EB97VYP0FQ8Q&keywords=50+science+fiction+tales&qid=1667283635&qu=eyJxc2MiOiwlLjAwliwicXNhIjoiMC4wMCIsInFzcCI6IjAuMDAifQ%3D%3D&s=books&sprefix=50+s%2Cstripbooks-intl-ship%2C340&sr=1-2](https://www.amazon.com/50-Science-Fiction-Tales-Competition-ebook/dp/B0BH4WHC9M/ref=sr_1_2?crid=2EB97VYP0FQ8Q&keywords=50+science+fiction+tales&qid=1667283635&qu=eyJxc2MiOiwlLjAwliwicXNhIjoiMC4wMCIsInFzcCI6IjAuMDAifQ%3D%3D&s=books&sprefix=50+s%2Cstripbooks-intl-ship%2C340&sr=1-2)

# Ancient Ghost Galaxy hidden in the Milky Way's Zone of Avoidance

Revealed by Gaia Spacecraft Data



An enormous 'ghost' galaxy, believed to be one of the oldest in the universe, was detected lurking on the outskirts of the Milky Way in November of 2018 by a team of astronomers who discovered the massive object when trawling through new data from the European Space Agency's Gaia satellite. The object, named Antlia 2, avoided detection thanks to its extremely low density as well as a perfect hiding place in the Zone of Avoidance, named by Edwin Hubble in 1929, behind the shroud of the Milky Way's disc—a region full of dust and an overabundance of bright stars near the galactic center.

"This is a ghost of a galaxy," said Gabriel Torrealba, an astrophysicist at Academia Sinica Institute of Astronomy and Astrophysics (ASIAA) and the paper's lead author. "Objects as diffuse as Ant 2 have simply not been seen before. Our discovery was only possible thanks to the quality of the Gaia data." Gaia is able to dig into the Zone of Avoidance, he says, because it provides high-quality proper motions of stars behind the central disk of our Milky Way galaxy. That is, it is able to track stars as they move across the celestial sphere.

"The zone of avoidance is basically the part of the sky obscured by the Milky Way's disk as seen from the Earth," said Torrealba. "The disk of the Milky Way has a lot of gas and stars, making it extremely crowded and complex." But the team was able to use about a hundred old and metal-poor pulsating, so-called 'RR Lyrae' stars to probe inside and ultimately identify Antlia 2.

In the image above, Antlia 2 is the faint galaxy on the right; Milky Way is center; and the LMC is shown on the left.

**From "The Daily Galaxy" October 2022**



# 50 SCIENCE FICTION TALES

Short Stories from the South African Nova Competition  
1969 - 2019

COMPILED & EDITED  
Gail Jamieson & Gary Kuyper

FOREWORD  
Dave Freer

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