

STEPHEN GOLDIN

The Last Ghost

STEPHEN GOLDIN was born February 28, 1947, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He began writing at the age of thirteen and first sold a story when he was eighteen.

He received his bachelor's degree in astronomy from UCLA in 1968 and then was employed for almost three years as a physicist/space scientist for Navy Space Systems. He left the Navy's employment to become, in his words, "a fulltime, starving writer." He is a member of Science Fiction Writers of America,

World Future Society, Astronomical Society of the Pacific, and the SFWA Speakers' Bureau. His hobby is zookeeping, and the current inventory of his menage lists cats, mice, chipmunks, fish, snakes, a rat, an iguana, a chameleon, a land crab, a hamster, a parrot and an alligator.

Goldin edited the forthcoming collection *The Alien Condition*, and he assisted editor David Gerrold with the collections *Protostars* and *Generation*. He has two novels in progress.

His short story "Sweet Dreams, Melissa," concerning a new-generation computer brought up to think it's a little girl, was anthologized in *Best SF: 7966*, edited by Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss, and also in *The Eleventh Galaxy Reader*, edited by Frederik Pohl.

"The Last Ghost" was a finalist in the balloting for the 1971 Nebula

Awards. It is a reminder that the ultimate loneliness is not the experience of the last man alive, but the last man dead.

Eternity is a terrible place to endure alone.

He is the last of his kind, if he is a "he." (Gender is an arbitrary difference. All things are eventually the same-and in eternity, eventually equals always.) He must once have had a name, a handle to his soul, but that was back before the eternity/instant when he had existed in corporeal form. He tries to think about things as he had known them, and finds he can't. He tries to think about things as they are, and finds he can't quite manage that, either. The will-be is far beyond his powers of contemplation.

He exists (if that's the word) in an everlasting now, as a state of nothingness less substantial than a vacuum, smaller than infinity, larger than thought. Eternity lies as far behind him as it does ahead. He drifts through this lack of anything at infinitely greater than no speed at all. He sees with non-eyes. He hears without ears. He thinks thoughtless thoughts that revolve in circles and make little eddies of emptiness in the not-quite-nothing of his mind.

He searches for

He wants a

He desires some
He loves to

No objects remain within his mental grasp. The words have been corroded by the gentle acid of time. All that's left is the search; the want; the desire; the love.

She began to appear slowly, a flicker at the limits of his nonperception. (Why he considered her a "she" could not be explained. There was just an aspect about her that was complementary to him.) His unthoughts raced in puzzlement. She was a newness in his stale cosmos, where nothing ever changed. He watched her as she took on a form even less substantial than his own. He watched with his crumbling mind at a crossroad, afraid to approach, even more afraid to run from her in fear. (If, that is, there were anyplace to run in eternity.)

She gained awareness suddenly, and started at the alien strangeness of her new environment. The eerie infinitude produced within her a wave of awe commingled with fear. She could, as yet, perceive only herself and the barren continuum around her.

She spoke. (What came out was not sound, but could be interpreted as communication.) "Where am I?"

The action was a simple one. It seemed utterly new to him, but down somewhere among the shards of his memory it was all tantalizingly familiar. He trembled.

She perceived his being, and turned her attention toward him. "What are you? What's happened to me?"

He knew the answers-or rather, he had known them. As it had with everything else, infinity had eaten away at these chunks of information too in what was left of his mind. It had all been so important once. So important! That was why he was what he was, and why he wasn't what he wasn't.

"Please!" she begged him. Hysteria edged her voice. "Tell me!"

Through mists that swirled down dusty corridors of memory, the words came out unbidden. "You are dead."

"No! That's impossible! I can't be!"

Loud silence.

"I can't be," she repeated. "Death was conquered more than five thousand years ago. After our minds were transferred into computer banks, we became immortal. Our bodies may fail, but our minds go on. Nobody dies anymore" Her voice trailed off.

"You are dead," he repeated emotionlessly.

"Are . . . are you a ghost?" she asked.

Though the meaning of the word had been stolen from him, that shred of identity remained: "Yes."

She brooded, and large quantities of non-time elapsed. He waited. He became accustomed to her existence. No longer was she an alien thing in his empty universe. She was now a half presence, and he accepted her as he had come to accept everything else-without comment.

"I suppose," she said at last, "some sort of equipment failure might have temporarily dislodged my personality pattern from the memory banks. But only temporarily. I'm only half dead so far. As soon as the trouble is fixed, I'll be all right again. I will be all right, won't I?"

' He didn't answer. He knew nothing about equipment failures --or had forgotten if he ever had known.

"Equipment failures are supposed to be impossible," she prattled on, trying desperately to convince herself that her comfortable reality would return again. "Still, in thousands of years even a trillion-to-one shot might happen. But they'll fix it soon. They've got to. They must. Won't they? Won't they?"

She stared at her impassive companion with non-eyes widened by panic. "Don't just stand there! Help me!"

Help. That word found a niche somewhere in the haunted cavern of his mind. He was supposed to help . . . to help . . .

The who, or what, or how he was supposed to help eluded him. That is, if he had ever known.

They drifted on through the void together, side by side, ghost and almost-ghost. The unthoughts of the elder spirit were tangled more than usual, owing to the presence of another after such a lonely period of timelessness. But it was not a bad tangle; in fact, it was rather nice to share the universe with someone else again. She was a pleasant aura beside him in an otherwise insensate world.

They had both existed for over five thousand years. He was undoubtedly the older of the pair; but the real difference between them was that, while he had existed alone for so long that solitude had nibbled away at his Swiss cheese mind, she had lived those centuries with other people, other minds-a situation that either cracks one completely or produces near-total stability. The latter was the case with her, and so eventually her initial panic subsided and the clinical attitude she had held for thousands of years returned.

"Well, it appears I'm going to be here for a while, so I might as well get acquainted with this place. And since you're the only thing around, I'll start with you. Who are you?"

"Dead."

"Obviously." Her non-voice managed to handle even sarcasm nicely. "But don't you have some kind of a name?"

"No."

"Just for a moment she lost her patience. "That's impossible, Gabbv. You must have had a name sometime. What was it?"

"I don't . . . I don't . . . I don't . . ." His broken-record attempt to

answer

was so pathetic that it touched the maternal instincts that she had thought long-dead within her.

"I'm sorry," she said a bit more tenderly. "Let's talk about something else. Where are we?"

"We are . . ."

"Dead," she finished with him. Oh Lord, help me have patience with him. He's worse than a child. "Yes, I know that. But I mean our physical location. Does it have a name?" ,

"No."

Stymied again. Her companion was obviously not inclined to conversation, but her analytical mind felt an urgent need to talk, to try to hold on to her sanity under such adverse conditions. "`All right, then, if you don't want to talk, do you mind if I do?"

"No."

So she did. She told him about her earliest life, when she had had a body, and about the things she had done and the children she had had. She spoke of the mind-transferral breakthrough that had finally enabled Man to conquer Death. She told him about the first thousand or so years she had spent in the computer bank when, exhilarated by the thrill of immortality, she had occupied animated robot bodies and engaged in "Death-defying" sports and exciting activities. And she related how even this had paled with time, and how she had passed into the current, mature phase of her life, the search for knowledge and wisdom. She told how ships had been built to take these computerized people to the stars, and what strange and wonderful things they had found there.

He listened. Most of it was incomprehensible to him, for the

words were either unfamiliar or forgotten. His sievelike mind retained very little of what she said. But he listened, and that was important. He soaked in the experience, the thrill, of another

pseudobeing communicating with him. -

At last she paused, unable to think of anything else to say. "Would you like to talk now?" she asked.

Something burned within him. "Yes."

"Good," she said. "What would you like to talk about?"

He tried hard to think of something, anything, but once again his brain failed him.

She sensed his difficulty. "Tell me something about yourself," she prompted.

"I am dead."

"Yes, I know that. But what else?"

He thought. What was "himself" that he could tell something about?

"I search for
"I want a
"I desire some

"I love to . . ."

"What, what, what, what?" she insisted. But there was no answer. Frustrated, she continued. "Let's try something else. Does

. . . did everyone who died become a ghost like you?";

"Yes."

"Where are they all, then?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Away."

Almost, she lost her patience again, but her millennia of training saved her. "They all went away?"

"Yes."

"All except you?"

"Yes."

"How long has it been?"

"Long."

She hadn't felt closer to crying in nearly five thousand years, both out of sympathy for this pathetic creature and frustration at being unable to solve his riddle. "Why didn't you go with them?"

"I . . . I was left behind."

.. Why?"

His answer came much more slowly this time, dredged from the silt at the bottom of his pool of consciousness. "To . . . to . . . to point the way for Those Who Follow."

"You're a guide, Then?" she asked incredulously.

'Yes.'

"To where?"

"To . . . to . . . away."

"Can you show me where?"

For the first time, sadness was in his voice. "No."

Slowly, very slowly, using all the powers of patience and logical reasoning she had developed over the centuries, she extracted from him

the pieces necessary to complete the puzzle. Long ago (how long was indeterminate; time has no meaning in eternity), the ghosts had discovered a new and higher level of existence. All of them had gone over to this new evolutionary state; all except one. One last ghost to show the way up for all the new ghosts who would be coming along.

Only, the mind-transferral breakthrough had changed all that. Suddenly, there were no new ghosts. And the last ghost was left alone. Duty confined him to ghostdom, and solitude condemned him to stagnation.

Her pity exploded like a pink nova, even while some analytical portion of her mind noted that the maternal instinct does not fade through disuse. She cradled his pathetic non-being deep within her own shadowy self and whispered words of tender concern.

And suddenly he felt warm with a glow he hadn't felt in eons. His null senses tingled deliciously with the nearness of this glorious other. Happily, he nestled himself against her.

A shock ripped through her. And another. And another. "Oh dear. They're repairing the equipment failure. Soon they'll be

fixing the memory circuit, and I'll go back to being alive again." In the sad stillness that followed, he uttered one word. "Don't." She was startled. This was the first time he had initiated a thought, the first time he had expressed a preference for something. "What did you say?" "Don't be alive." "Why not?" "I need" "What?" She could feel herself beginning to fade from this nonplace. "I need" "Yes? Tell me. Tell me what you need." "I need" "What?" She was fading quickly. "I don't have much time left here. Please, tell me what!" "I need" She disappeared forever from his non-universe, without a trace.

The last ghost wanders. He is a signpost with nowhere to point. He is a guide with no one to lead. So he drifts on with an empty mind and a half-forgotten, unfulfillable purpose. And occasionally:

I NEED

I NEED

I NEED

As always, the object eludes him.