

## Eddy C. Bertin

Eddy C. Bertin (1944- ) lives in Flanders and is a leading Belgian SF and horror writer. He has published over 500 stories, over fifty in English, some Lovecraftian horror, some science fiction. He started writing at age thirteen, in Dutch, and published twenty-five books for adults between 1970 and 1986 in the Netherlands; he then switched to writing for children and young adults, and has published sixteen more books since 1986. He has in the past published poetry, translations, and 140 issues of his own *SF Guide* over eighteen years. He has written an SF future history trilogy that has not been published in English.

Most European countries have at least a few long-time science fiction writers, who have been producing fiction for decades. They are not always highly regarded internationally, but they have kept the international SF movement alive for its own sake for decades, in spite of the waves of literary fashion. Often they travel to meet other SF people at their own expense in other countries, and publish small press magazines to keep their own culture informed. Bertin is a distinguished representative of these men from the 1960s and the present. This story is a small jewel of a mood piece.

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## SOMETHING ENDING

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ou don't exist," was the first thing the ugly little fat man said to me as I entered the pub. He was seated on a barstool which was much too tall for someone his size, and his short stubby legs in their wrinkled trousers dangled freely without even touching the floor. He could hardly be called an attractive specimen of homo sapiens. His face looked like a sponge, with flabby cheeks and slobbering thin lips. His deep-sunken eyes were blurred by the amount of strong drinks he had had, and in these he showed an amazing appetite for variations, as indicated by the outstanding series of different empty glasses in front of him, and which he refused to let be taken away. The barman was eyeing him with open hostility and annoyance.

He looked me over once more, nodded, satisfied at his own reflection in the mirror, and repeated with more intonation: "No, you really don't exist." Satisfied with the approval of his mirror-image, he ordered another drink. There was no other place vacant, so I took the stool beside him, and since he made no gesture of buying me a drink, I ordered my own.

“You seem very certain of that,” I said. Not that I cared very much what any fat drunk muttered to me, but I hate just sitting and drinking. I had been obliged to spend the evening in town, with no friends I cared to see, and no movie worth going to, either. In fact I had been preparing myself for a quiet evening at home with a good novel or maybe a rock-show on the tube, and a couple of good Napoleon brandies, when Vodier had called me on the phone, asking if I were at home that evening. This had immediately resulted in my stating that I had to rush off to an urgent press-conference in a couple of minutes, and wouldn’t be home till the next day. Vodier was a nice chap, but he had the irritating habit of hanging around till the early hours of the next morning, and his conversational habits were limited to one single subject: himself. Since I knew Vodier was liable to drive over anyway, just in the vague hope that my conference had been cancelled at the last instant, there was only one thing to do: get out as fast as possible. Which I had done.

Maybe this weirdo would bring some amusement in an otherwise dreary evening, and since there seemed to be no free female companionship available in this pub, I might as well make the best of it. Ghent is a nice city to live in, but it hasn’t much to offer as nightlife, compared to Brussels or Antwerp, and I didn’t feel like driving another couple of miles to find another more interesting cafe.

The stranger shook his head pityingly, murmuring: “Poor, poor chap, so utterly convinced that he really exists, that he has real life, and what is he in fact? Phut. Nothing. Zero. A hole. A vacuum.”

“Can’t say I ever thought about myself that way,” I said grinning. “Maybe my reasoning is a bit confused, but I feel my hands here, flesh and bone, and here a head on top of my body. *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. More, I FEEL that I am. Seems quite logical to me.”

“Bloody nonsense,” he said angrily. “You only BELIEVE that you exist; there’s quite a difference between believing and being. You have no real proof of your existence. You’re just a dummy; you may as well believe me. Knowing the truth about oneself always makes one happier, or so I’ve been told.”

I laughed. The funny chap had his voice remarkably under control, but he clearly was completely stoned. You don’t meet them often that way and still able to talk.

“All right, I don’t exist,” I grinned. “So what next? What makes you so goddamn sure anyway? If I don’t exist, then why are you speaking to me?”

He looked me over with what surely must be the special look he reserved for people asking insane questions. “I am speaking to you because I want to,” he said. “Because nothing exists except me and what I want. You are here because of me, you exist because I want you to exist here and now. I would have thought that was very simple to see, don’t you? Oh, go to hell! One can’t talk with someone of your kind. You understand nothing, accept nothing, bah.”

He rose and dropped himself from his high seat of judgment. He threw some money at the barman and walked away, without saying as much as good night.

I concentrated on my drink and had two more, still thinking with amusement of the words of the funny madman. Then I drove home, got out and walked straight in the arms of a grinning Vodier, who had brought a crate of beer with him and kept me up till four o'clock in the morning.

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The second time I ran into the funny-talking fat stranger was at quite a different place, at a charity ball of all things. It was one of those dry and hot evenings, which reassures you in advance that it will be raining like hell before the evening is done. The heat was unbearable in the dancing hall, and the fridge of the bar had chosen that exact evening to break down, so they had no ice cubes for the warm drinks. I decided to get a breath of fresh air on the terrace. And just guess who was standing there, his small hands on his back, staring up at the night stars? Yes, you got it right the first time. Mister You-don't-exist himself.

He looked over his shoulder as he heard my footsteps approaching and smiled amicably. He seemed sober this time.

“Hello, Mister Dummy,” he said as a manner of greeting. “Made your mind up yet about whether or not you exist?”

“One day or other you're gonna get punched in the mouth if you speak to anyone like that,” I said. For a moment I considered whether I should turn around and just walk away. After all he was no more than a bizarre but harmless weirdo. Still something about the fat little man intrigued me, and I decided to stay around for a couple of minutes. But he had already turned away from me and contemplated the night sky. He spoke again, this time more to himself, as if it were totally unimportant whether I listened or not.

“Nice shining stars up there,” he said. “Specially the great sparkling one over there. You know, if I could stand up high enough and stretch my arms, I could just pick them right out of the sky. That specific star as well as all the other fake ones. It might convince you that I'm not crazy. And maybe then I would find out what's on the other side of that sky.”

I shrugged. “Then why don't you just do that?”

He grinned. "It doesn't work," he said. "I tried it a couple of times, but they're faster than me. As soon as I stand on my toes, they just raise the sky a bit higher, out of my reach."

"So?" I asked. "First I don't exist. Now the sky is a curtain where you can pick the fake stars from. You do hold some pretty cranky ideas."

"Cranky?" He seemed shocked. "Wasn't it Shakespeare who said that the world's a stage? Or was that someone else? Not that it matters that much who said it, he or she surely had some idea about the truth of existence. But why am I bothering with you? One can't talk sense into an empty head. You're nothing, go away, shoo!"

"So, I am nothing. Well, just feel this hand. Feel the flesh, the muscles, the bones. That seems real enough to me. And you do hear me, don't you? So I can speak, too."

He smiled, all sympathy. "You got me all wrong, Mister. I am not talking about your material body. Of course that exists, just as this terrace and these stars exist for the time being. A window dummy exists, which doesn't mean that he IS. The ego, the mind, the 'I' which you call 'me,' that doesn't exist. The material body you have, the streets over there, they are for real, too, but only temporary. They're make-believes, stage settings, just as the whole neighborhood. As soon as I'll be gone, they and you will stop existing. It's all here. because I am here. There must be air for me to breathe, there must be a terrace since I can't be standing here floating in empty air, and since I feel like talking to someone, you are here. If I decided to go to China now, this Europe would cease to exist the moment I left it. It would no longer be needed, since I would have left it."

This was just too much, and my laughing exploded in his face. It wasn't very polite, I admit, and it even might have been dangerous, You never know with a crazy; he didn't look aggressive, but you never know. But then. I was bigger than he, and I was certain that I could handle him if he tried to attack me. But he didn't.

"That's a good one," I said after I had stopped laughing. "Well, let me tell you that I know very well what I've been doing those last weeks, and I don't recall you being with me then or being in the neighborhood where I was."

"Artificial memories," he shrugged. "They're very good at them. They just put them inside your head so that you would be able to play your part as true-to-life as possible."

"They did, huh? And the rest of the world, all those other countries? I suppose they don't exist now since you aren't there?"

“Quite right,” he said as if stating an indisputable fact. “They’re just illusions, make-believes created to convince me that the world does exist. Tell me, were you ever really there? In China or Australia, in India or in Hungary?”

“Well no,” I said. “I haven’t been there. I wouldn’t know why I should go there. But there are photographs, films, libraries...”

“Nonsense, it’s all fake. You know only that small part of the world or even of this country in which you are, here and now. All the rest you know only by hearsay. I tell you, there is no world, no other countries, not even a real sky. It’s just a stage curtain. Humanity, as such, is a dream. The only reality is my own being, and the stage they erect wherever I go. And of course all the dummies like yourself who only come into existence whenever I am near. People like you, and taxi drivers, and barkeepers, and cops, and traveling salesmen and housewives... people...”

I gasped at him. He couldn’t mean that, could he? If he did... well, I had met quite some weirdos in my life, but this one was really too much. He was ready for the men in the white suits to come and drag him away.

“The truth hurts, doesn’t it?” he asked innocently. “But don’t worry about it, Mister. After a while, you’ll get used to being a third-rate character in the play I’m performing.”

With these words, he turned and disappeared into the crowd inside.

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During the following months, somehow or other, my thoughts often returned to the crazy little fellow. Strange how some crazies manage to sound too utterly convincing and logical, even while they’re talking absolute nonsense. Like when he spoke of those other faraway countries which only existed on films and photographs or just because others tell us they do exist. But, then, in the little man’s mind, all those others were no more than animated showroom dummies themselves, so it hardly mattered. Must be quite a frightening stage in his own mind, I thought, a world-wide theater in which performs one fat little ugly performer.

History tends to repeat itself, as they say, and so does this story, because when I met the stranger the third time, he was stone-drunk again. It was in another bar this time, one which had chairs small enough for him to sit on with his feet on the ground, which was as well, since I doubt if he would have managed

his balance otherwise. I sat down in front of him, his eyes seemed more hidden below the ridges of fat than before, and he had to look three times before recognizing me.

“Oh, yes, it’s you again,” he said. “My own Mister Nothing. They must think quite a lot of your character for giving you three stage acts. Have a drink with me, since you’re here anyway.”

He seemed preoccupied and moody. We had a drink and then another one, but he didn’t brighten. He did talk, however.

“I’m scared,” he said in an appropriate stage whisper. “You see, I’ve started doubting my own existence. Suppose, just suppose that I, too, don’t really exist? What if I am no more than one of the dummies, a walking-talking-singing-drinking doll with a set of false memories? What sense would the world have then if it wasn’t made for me? What if it is made and kept in existence for someone else? I couldn’t bear that thought. If I was sure, I would have to hunt and kill that man or woman. But who knows? Maybe I would then cease to exist completely, as well as the rest of the world.”

“That would be some problem indeed,” I agreed.

“And it’s not that fantastic at all,” he continued. “I know, I have always known that I exist. But how can I prove it to myself? There is only one way to go about it: catch them! CATCH THEM AT IT!’ But how? I’ve tried everything possible so far. I went somewhere and suddenly changed direction. I bought a ticket to Africa and to London. But they’re so fast, by the time the plane got there, they had built Africa and peopled it, complete with animals and tourists, just like in the traveler’s catalogues. And when I got to London, they had already gotten it ready, except for part of the Tower, but they had their explanation ready: the Tower was being repaired just then. Everything turns out to be exactly as in the movies and pictures. They’re good all right! It’s almost as if they know in advance what I intend to do, or else they’re just too damned fast and good at stage-building. They’re smart, and they know I’m trying to catch them.”

“THEY,” I said. “You’re always rambling about THEM. Who or what are THEY?”

“Isn’t that clear yet? The builders, the owners of the stage, of course. They who hide themselves behind the sky-curtain, they who have built this world-theater and put me here in their play. You see, I think this is something like those intelligence tests they’re always supposed to be doing with rats and mice and guinea pigs. They put them in a maze, and the food is at the other end of the maze. The guinea pig has to find its way through the corridors of the maze or it’ll starve to death. Since the guinea pig has no gun to burn itself a straight way through the maze, it has to search, but at regular intervals they change the corridors of the maze, so the guinea pig has to adapt all the time in order to get to the food and survive. See, that’s what I think I am. A rat in a maze, and they control the corridors. But I am more than a rat, I know they’re THERE, and I intend to find out about them. I’m gonna burn myself through that maze in a straight line!”

“But why... would THEY go to all that trouble?”

“I don’t know, but I have several ideas,” he whispered. “Maybe all of this is just THAT: an experiment with a lower animal. A kind of reaction test. Maybe they just want to know how I’ll work it all out, how fast I react to stimulations. And maybe... they’re afraid of me. It isn’t that silly, there must be a very logical reason for my being that all-important to them, to go to all that work and trouble. Maybe this is some kind of prison they’ve put me in, and they’ve taken some memories out of my mind, so I can’t remember who I am or why I’m here. Maybe it’s some kind of mental symbiosis: maybe they only exist because I exist, and MY being is their only reason for being. Maybe I’m a psychotic god, a lonely god, who has built a neurotic wall around himself and is now trying to get sane again. Maybe I even created THEM myself, so they could put me in their own play! As a snake eating its own tail. Maybe I am the one and only center of the universe, and therefore they - as my creations - are afraid of me.”

He took a sip of his drink, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. The drink was getting to him, his speech was becoming less clear every minute.

“But it’ll be over soon now,” he whispered. “I’m not that stupid, you see. I said I would burn my way through at them in a straight line, and that’s what I’m gonna do. I’ve found the way to get them, the bastards!” He ordered new drinks and bent lower so that I had trouble understanding his words. “I’m going to them damn stars,” he whispered. “Sounds like nut talk, doesn’t it? I don’t look like a scientist or a spaceman, but I’m going anyway. Right through those fake stars, and then let them try to make a universe for me. I’ve been thinking about it for some time. I can’t make a spaceship, but if I’m that important, then there must be other ways for me to get out of their maze. I’ve built a ship. Well, no, not exactly what you could call a spaceship. It’s no more than just a hollow sphere with a chair in it. I can seal it airtight from the inside, and I’m taking oxygen tanks, food and drink. Probably I won’t even need any of that, if the powers I’ve tapped inside my mind work out as I intend them to. Because I’m going to do it with my mind and nothing else.”

He patted his head, grinning. “Yeah, ol’ man, inside my head, there it is. Inside my brain, all the power I need to get at them. I’ve been reading up on such things as telekinesis, the transportation of matter by mental powers. Enough to lift the sphere and myself up to that damn sky, and burn through it. If there is only one really existing mind, which is mine, then that mind must possess those powers. I’m getting out of here tonight. You’re the only one who knows now, and you’re just another dummy, after all. Now once I’m through their sky-curtain let them try to keep up the illusion. Let them try to create real space, real stars, out there!”

“It’s crazy.” I said. “You need a real spaceship for that, engines, computers, technicians. It’s an absurd idea!”

“Course it is,” he agreed. “That’s why it’s genius. They’ll never think of it before I get there and see for myself! You don’t think I’m doing this without some preparations, do you? I’ve been testing my mental powers for weeks now, lifting tables, opening doors without touching them. Then other things, more heavy. Then giving them speed, always more speed! Oh, yes, I’m certain it’ll work as I planned it. I just... FEEL it. I set my starting date for next month, so of course I’ll be taking off tonight! I’ll catch them all right when they’re totally unprepared for me. But I thought I’d have a couple of drinks first, to test my courage. It may turn out to be a long trip if they try to create the universe when I’m coming, and I’m pretty sure they’ll try. Even if I manage to drive my speed up towards the speed of light, it’s still more than five light-years to the closest star, Alpha Centauri. But I may encounter them sooner than that.”

When I left him, he was still drinking and muttering to himself how he’d finally get them, the bastards.

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About eleven o’clock, I saw his sphere rising from the center of the city where I knew he lived. It was just a small, dark ball, which rose hesitatingly above the buildings, but then suddenly picked up speed, floating faster and faster towards the skies. It looked like a toy balloon, getting smaller and smaller, but it moved in one straight line up. He was going to burn his way through all right, just as he had said he would. He had left earlier than he had said, but I had expected that, too.

I waited till he had left the atmosphere, calculating the orbit he would follow - to get away from earth and then the trajectory he would be following in the years to come, beyond the outer planets and into the void beyond, towards Alpha Centauri. I had already set the apparatus, and the projections of the outer planets and the stars would pass off satisfactorily on his eyes. There would be no errors. I still had time enough to catch up with him before he reached his destination. After all, I would have to be on the meeting committee.

“Boy, do your best,” I thought. “You’ve wasted thirty-seven years down here: you should already be in the second-stage for a long time. Why doesn’t your mind work faster, better?”

It wasn’t my fault, nor my symbiont-wife’s; our genes matched perfectly. Our getting a retarded child was just one of those things, it happens sometimes.

But now he HAD to succeed. He had left the nursery now, and was speeding towards the kindergarten. By then he would have figured it all out, he would have to! If he didn’t he would be considered a total failure. I would be allowed no more children, and he... he would be erased from existence. The committee didn’t lose its time with the unfit for the universe. They will be waiting for him, when he gets there, at Alpha Centauri, and I will be among them, unable to help him. He’ll have to make it on his own, my son. And, though retarded, he hasn’t been doing too badly after all. It was fortunate that they had at least let me work on the nursery years.



He has made a few errors and misjudgments, of course. What infant doesn't? He had drawn the wrong conclusion also when he had said that the world doesn't exist. When I do something, I do it well. There IS a real world. Now I'm beginning to tear it down.