

DEATH IS AN ACQUIRED TRAIT

by Mike Resnick

As things stand now, the 2043 Kentucky Derby is going to be won by Hi Falutin, which is a pretty silly name for a horse, but by the time his career is over it won't seem any sillier than Swaps or Tim Tam or Seattle Slew. He's going to win by a neck in two minutes one second flat on a fast track, and Barfly, who will finish third, will be disqualified and placed last for interfering with three other horses in the homestretch.

Exactly seven thousand one hundred and fifty-six years later, the star known as Antares will go nova.

And two million and three years after that, the first glimmerings of intelligence will be noticeable among the strange little mollusks that inhabit the tidal pools on the fourth planet of the star known as Spica.

I'd tell you my name, but you probably couldn't pronounce it and I probably wouldn't spell it the same way twice in a row -- it changes a lot, you know (or maybe you *don't* know, which really isn't my problem anyway). I think will tell you where I come from, though. It changes a lot too, but these days we're calling it Quiggle. Or maybe Quabble. Anyway, it's the sixth planet circling the star you know as Betelgeuse. Or, at least, it used to be. I don't think it's there anymore. Just as well. Seeing it would only depress me -- especially the spot where I'm buried.

But now I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

Once upon a time I belonged to a race of humanoids that inhabited the sixth planet of Betelgeuse, which we used to call Profff in the old days. Also, I use the word "humanoids" only to give you a point of reference. Actually, I always thought we were more the human type, and that you guys were the humanoids. But why quibble? (Say, that's not bad! I think we'll call it Quibble starting next week.)

I lived during the golden age of my planet, although we called it the mauve age since gold wasn't all that hard to come by. Huge skyscrapers covered the surface of our fair world, except where there was water, in which cases enormous bubble-domed cities floated atop the mighty seas, plying their commerce between the many majestic continents.

In a matter of a few centuries we achieved space flight, converted all our appliances and factories to sunpower, eliminated completely and forever any taint of racial prejudice, outgrew all of our superstitious old religions, and began probing the secrets of the universe in earnest.

Unfortunately, all this took a little while to accomplish, especially the part about the secrets of the universe, and while our medical science had progressed far beyond anything you are ever going to achieve, we nonetheless aged and died, albeit at a far slower rate than any other life form in the galaxy.

Well, to cut through all the palaver, one of the secrets of the universe we sought to unlock was the secret of eternal life. We already had lifespans of more than a millennium, so that seemed the next logical step.

We tried injections, and freezing, and hypnosis, and DNA surgery (yes, we could operate on DNA molecules back then), and hormone injections, but nothing seemed to work. Then one day Raxrgh Ghhoule -- that's not his name any longer, but it's the one I curse all the time -- came up with a solution to the problem that involved a little biochemistry, a little philosophy, a little physics, and a couple of other things that I couldn't even pronounce let alone spell. As a result of his experiments, we became completely free of our physical shells and became creatures of pure thought. Or maybe pure energy. I was never too clear on that point, though I don't imagine that it makes any difference at this late date. (And a late date it is: my body turned to dust almost eight billion years ago.)

At first we were utterly delighted with our new-found immortality. We retained our individuality, and while we could no longer see or hear or touch, we gained a whole plethora of new perceptive senses.

Of course, there were a few things that were lost forever. Like *crachhm*. You've never heard of it? Well, *crachhm* bears a strong resemblance to veal parmesan, only the spices are more subtle and the

cheese is a more delightful color. Do you know what it's like to go almost eight billion years without a bite of *crachhm*?

Then there was my *krttz*. That's a collective noun for wife, but it means a little more, since I had four of them, one of each sex. Sex among the five of us was never all that easy or simple even when we had bodies; without them, it was absolutely impossible. Not only is it difficult to get very lustful over a creature of pure energy, but they appeared just like me. Even to think of sex with them in their new form seemed sort of perverted, if you know what I mean.

Well, after a while -- a few million years or so -- I began to feel less cheated. After all, I didn't have the wherewithall to eat or copulate anyway, so it became an exercise of mind over matter, or mind over the memory of matter, or something like that. Most of us had these initial problems, but we finally overcame them and turned our thoughts to more important matters.

We probed backward to the dawn of the universe, saw the Primal Atom take form, and extrapolated the life and death of every star, every planet, every species of sentient and non-sentient creature, and finally saw the universe come to a total standstill, completely in the thrall of entropy. Then, since the future has infinite permutations, we explored every possible future, based on every conceivable action that might be taken anywhere in the universe.

It was fascinating when we first did it, and it's still mildly interesting now, but you must realize our dilemma: once you've done the universe, there *is* nothing else.

That's when we began to get bored.

Oh, we fought against it. We explored parallel universes, examined an infinite number of dimensions, even probed back to the universe that existed before the formation of the Primal Atom. (It was a pretty dull one: no music, and only 23 elements.) It didn't help much; we were still bored.

So we began extrapolating entirely new universes, based at first upon logical premises, and, later, based on magic, alchemy, anything we could think of. I can remember extrapolating an entire galaxy based on the assumption that Donald Duck was God -- and this was five billion years before Walt Disney was born.

But it was no use. Sooner or later, each and every one of us got bored.

I think Riliias Prannch was the first of us to suggest it, though the rest of us certainly had been toying with the notion: racial suicide. Ah, what a sweet thought, what a pleasant fancy!

I can still remember the instant that, like lemmings to the sea, we plunged into a nearby star, prepared to be sizzled to a cinder -- and nothing happened, except that we found out what the inside of a star looks like.

Then old Klannenn Porbisht suggested turning off all our sensory perceptions...only no one knew how to do it. I mean, it wasn't as if we had eyelids we could close or anything like that. It simply wouldn't work.

Finally, Robatt Xazzar tried to extrapolate a heaven and a hell so that we could determine how to gain admission to either. That was a failure, too.

So we turned our collective brainpower from all other aspects of existence and creation, and tried to figure out how to bring about our racial death.

We tried just about everything. We tried religion, we tried philosophy, we tried stretching ourselves so thin that we vanished, we exposed ourselves to every conceivable type of radiation. We visited planets where Death was worshipped and revered, and we observed nameless ceremonies in which the living were killed and the dead were made to live again. We poured over the libraries of galaxy after galaxy, and even sought an answer amongst the quasars and the quarks.

Our conclusion, after some three billion years of trying, was that suicide, while it may well have been a consumation devoutly to be wished, was still beyond our means.

This only served to spur us on to greater efforts. Every theory, every equation, every lemma, every prayer, every mystic chant, every hypothesis was examined, explored, analyzed, inverted, and built upon. Every universe co-existing with ours in different temporal planes, different vibratory rates, and different dimensions was visited and thoroughly ransacked for a solution, but none could be found.

So we went back to our other studies, but always, just beneath the surface of our examinations,

was the ever-present desire to find a way to die. I remember that we finally got around to playing with Time, turning it inside-out and upside-down. Ostensibly these were just mental exercises, but each of us knew the real purpose of our endeavors: if we could just find a way to make Time flow backward to a point a few seconds before Raxrgh Ghhoule figured out how to free us from our mortal bodies, we might find a way to silence him and thus attain blessed oblivion.

But it was not to be. Time buckled here and there, yielded to this pressure and that, but ultimately we were forced to admit that we could not rend its fabric and return to that fateful moment.

Then one day little Plooka Pitzm -- one of my own beloved *krirtz* -- wasn't there anymore. We were at first disbelieving, then worried, and finally hopeful. Had she actually found a way to die? It was almost too good to be true -- and indeed, it wasn't true at all. We found her, at last, in the odoriferous universe of Blimm (it's made primarily of old Munster cheese, and is three vibratory levels removed from this one), humming happily to herself. For a moment I feared that she had lost her mind, but she soon became aware of our collective presence and explained that, as bored as she was with existence in general, she was most especially bored with our company, and no longer wished to be associated with us.

What could we do but accede to her wishes? The problem was that soon many other members of my race decided to strike out for a solitary life, and this left even less of us to work on the problem of ending our existence, solitary or otherwise.

Then, suddenly, Pratsch Pratsch Pratsch (he certainly does like the sound of his name!) went stark staring mad. He began gibbering like an idiot, singing bawdy verses gathered from a trillion worlds, and muttering obscenities to himself, interspersing all this with maniacal giggling.

For a time we debated whether or not to cure him, and finally concluded that he would be far happier like this than returning to our unending boredom and sanity. Well, Pratsch Pratsch Pratsch ranted and raved for almost 37 million years, when finally the madness ran its course and he became his old self again. It was then that we began to realize that even total insanity was at best a temporary oasis in this vast desert of boredom.

So that's where matters stand now. About half my race has decided to cut all ties with the remaining unit, and on any given day another tenth of us are quite mad (although, alas, only temporarily.)

We still seek our demise, as a race or as individuals, but it seems less and less likely. After all, that's the problem with immortality: by definition, you *are* deathless.

My only pleasure now is to try to prevent other races from making the same horrible mistake we made. I think I've just saved the natives of Aldebaren XII from it, and hopefully I've hindered that chemist on Gamma Epsilon II enough that he'll never accomplish it either.

And so here I am, talking to you. You see, there's this kid in Omaha who's got a little gerrybuilt laboratory in his basement. He's got some drycell batteries, and a few bread molds, and he seems to be on the right track. (It's not all that hard to do once you get the knack. Ask Raxrgh Ghhoule -- he'll tell you.)

Anyway, this kid doesn't know what he's doing, but his sister is dating a grad student from the University of Nebraska, and this student's best friend is...

Well, you get the picture.

There is only one past; it is a fixed and immutable thing. But there are an infinite number of futures. In most of them the secret of immortality will be safe from you, but in some it won't be -- and believe me, it's not worth the risk.

So step in front of an oncoming train, or find some painless but lethal narcotic, or stick your head in a gas oven.

I've seen your planet form, seen it go from a molten world to a thing of gossamer beauty. I've watched your race crawl out of the water, stand erect, sprout thumbs, conquer fire, invent the wheel, harness the atom. I couldn't love you more if you were my own children. I have only one wish for you.

Death and destruction.

That's a father's prayer.

-- The End --