

The Greatest Invention

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You know (began Einstein), God did lousy first drafts.

Consider the universe, for example -- and we might as well consider it, since there isn't anything else. It's close to seventeen billion years old, give or take a couple of months, and yet it took almost fourteen billion years for life to develop anywhere.

And the first life forms weren't exactly the type that would make you want to write home and brag about them. They were single-celled little creatures, invisible to the naked eye, which was probably all for the best since they were ugly as sin when you looked at them through a microscope.

Eventually they developed arms and legs and nostrils and things like that, and crawled out of the primeval ooze and onto dry land.

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"Is he talking about Earth?" asked Sinderella. "I didn't think Man was that old."

"I'll ask him," said Big Red, tapping away.

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You think Earth had a monopoly on primeval ooze (answered Einstein)?

As a matter of fact, the very first race to climb out of the muck and mire were the Beldorians of Danix VI. They were a humanoid race, and not without their admirable traits, although it was another billion years before any of them got around to inventing personal hygiene.

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"He thinks personal hygiene is the greatest invention of all time?" said Three-Gun Max with a sardonic laugh.

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If I'm interrupted once more, I'll stop enlightening you and go back to my drink (said Einstein, who was frowning and staring right at Max with his sightless eyes).

As I was saying, the Beldorians were a humanoid race. To the uninitiated, they all seemed to have goiters in their armpits, but the trained observer would soon have deduced that the growths in question were actually Beldorian fetuses. That's right: the Beldorians reproduced by budding.

And, need I add, their numbers were diminishing with each generation? I mean, who wants to walk around with an unborn child hanging from each armpit? Among other things, it really hinders your spear-throwing, and it almost guarantees that you'll never invent basketball. Reproduction was a pain in the ass -- or, to be more specific, in the armpit -- and hardly anyone felt inclined to practice it.

It was when Iggloth, a Beldorian who had just come of age, accidentally rubbed up against his companion, Marlieth, while they were sleeping in a cave, that he suddenly discovered she was nice to touch. So he touched her again. She was a heavy sleeper, but eventually all the touching woke her up and she decided that she enjoyed it, and began reciprocating. In fact, they spent the next month doing nothing except eating an occasional sandwich and touching each other here and there.

Touching each other here was very pleasant, to be sure, but it was when they touched each other there that the results were electrifying. Later that day, when they ran out of sandwiches and had nothing else to do with their mouths, they invented kissing. It took them another seven years of trial and error to make it to the next step, but sure enough, they finally invented sex on a rainy autumn afternoon.

Of course, if it had stopped right there with the two of them, galactic history would have taken a different and considerably less interesting course. But the fact of the matter is that Barlotuth, Iggloth's closest friend, stopped by one day to see if he'd like to go fishing.

"Go away," muttered Iggloth. "I'm busy."

"For how long?" asked Barlotuth, an accommodating fellow.

"Til a year from next Tuesday!" snapped Marlieth.

Up to that point Barlotuth hadn't even known Marlieth was there, since the cave was quite dark, but now he squinted all five of his eyes and peered forward.

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously.

"We don't have a word for it," said Iggloth. "But it's really nifty! You should try it."

"It can't be more fun than fishing!" said Barlotuth.

"Fine," said Iggloth. "Go fishing and leave us alone."

Barlotuth was about to answer when Marlieth suddenly started giggling louder and louder, ending in a happy (if ear-splitting) shriek.

"All right," he said, turning and wandering away from the mouth of the cave. "If it's that much fun, maybe I'll give it a shot."

And he did, and soon the word spread, and before long all the Beldorians were doing it. Now, nothing much came of the invention at first -- after all, they were carrying these unborn babies under their arms -- but mutation is a wonderful thing, and before long there weren't any more budding babies, and sex became so popular that it immediately spread all across the galaxy to every sentient and non-sentient species, though I intuit that it never crossed the intergalactic void and that they still reproduce by budding in Andromeda.

Anyway, that's how it happened, and if Iggloth and Marlieth were here now, I'm sure we'd all give them a standing ovation. And if they could stop touching each other long enough to pay attention -- and doubtless Bet-a-World O'Grady can compute the odds on that -- I'm equally certain they'd be justly proud of how enthusiastically everyone has taken to their invention.

In fact, now that I think of it, they not only invented sex, but they also invented mutation.

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"I never knew that," admitted Catastrophe Baker.

"The universe is filled with infinite mysteries," chimed in Achmed of Alphard. "Strangely enough," he added thoughtfully, "most of them can be discovered in bed with a member of the opposite sex."

"And they don't get much more opposite than women," added Nicodemus Mayflower, staring admiringly at Sinderella.

"Just imagine," continued Baker. "If it hadn't been for them two Beldorians all those billions of years ago, I could look at Silicon Carny here and not feel a thing."

"You're not about to feel anything now," she shot back. "Just keep your hands to yourself."

Everyone laughed at that, none louder than Catastrophe Baker himself.

I checked the clock behind the bar. Ordinarily Reggie and I would start closing the place down in another half hour or so, but heroes need less sleep than most, and they all seemed to be in a talkative mood this particular night. Besides we had to keep an eye out for enemy ships, so I told Reggie to just keep serving them as long as they wanted.

Baker finished another drink, then walked over to Big Red. "Ask Einstein who invented God," he said.

Big Red put the question to him, and got the answer back almost instantly.

"He says it's still a point of some debate as to whether we invented God or He invented us."

"Maybe a third party invented us and God," offered Max, who could never leave well enough alone.

"Maybe Einstein ought to turn all of his brainpower to figuring it out," suggested Baker.

Another brief pause, while Big Red waited for Einstein's answer.

"He says he'd rather figure out which came first, the chicken or the egg."

"Beats me," admitted Baker. "But whichever it was, I take my hat off to the man who invented the frying pan."

"You guys just don't understand at all," said the Reverend Billy Karma. "God invented everything. He just uses Men and aliens as His tools."

"Yeah?" Max shot back. "Suppose you tell me why God would want to invent pimples or jock itch?"

"Just as you can't appreciate good without having known evil, you can't appreciate good health without having experienced illness."

"Why do you have to appreciate it?" persisted Max. "Why can't you just experience it? Or is God such a self-centered prima donna that He's got to make everyone sing His praises night and day?"

"You know, I just hate it when you ask questions like that," said Billy Karma. He turned to Argyle. "Let's go back to talking about the god of sexual potency. Maybe it's blasphemous, but it beats the hell out of pondering all these deep philosophic questions."

"I find deep philosophic questions fascinating," said the multi-colored alien.

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that," muttered Billy Karma.

"In fact," continued Argyle, "when I was younger I spent my entire fortune seeking the answers to the mysteries of the universe."

"You ever come up with any?" asked Baker.

"A few."

"Care to share 'em with us?"

Argyle shrugged, which made him look like an animated kaleidoscope.

"Why not?" he said.