

Little House on the Accretion Disk by Gordon Gross

HE WATCHED AS THE LAST of Utit slowly elongated and was consumed by the infinite depths of what had been their (and was now his) pond. It was the part of her she had fashioned into a hand reaching out to him, waiting for his touch but knowing it might not arrive. Despite the time effect, he was sure it had wiggled a good-bye just before it vanished. He may even have remembered what happiness was before he recognized she was gone. Utit was gone. He focused on the center of the pond unable and unwilling to dive in, the accompanying light show above and below the pond, twin geysers of energy, warmed him. 20,000,000,000 pulses of the time-spot passed before he was ready to move again.

Sirtot recalled when, so many pulses ago, he had contemplated *going male*. The thoughts formed solid in front of him as he watched.

“A nod to the ancient beginnings of the species,” he had explained to her.

Entertained, Utit discussed *going female*. “To maintain eternal balance,” she had returned to him, spinning with laughter.

Sirtot and Utit had tangled themselves up in the fantasy and considered the possibility of adding life to the void. It was a heartless and cynical joke after so many years of watching the stars around them wink into death. They had known with certainty that there were no longer any others, no new stars being born, no new others to speak with. Who would have rebuked them?

The discussion had continued to the pulse of the time-spot. What hurry? They had eventually concluded that any life they brought forth would be short lived and miserable. Realistically they were too absorbed with their own existence to concentrate on any solid-matter forms they could construct.

In the end they had allowed the idea to dissipate, just as the rest of the universe was. In an ironic comment, they assumed their diametric genders anyway (by no means the only possible genders, but culled from racial memory) in an effort to give a mythic symmetry to the death all around them.

Sirtot focused on the time-spot. It winked at him as it pulsed. A great number of pulses passed, the interval between them diminishing; he instinctively drifted near the blue shore of the pond, his consciousness following his focus. His energy stretched toward it, but he held himself back—hesitant and unsure.

Another memory drifted into his perception.

Utit had guided the small rock into the pond and had entwined her thoughts

and energy around Sirtot as they watched it. As it fell toward infinity its movement slowed, its form stretched, and was eventually consumed—sucked into the edge of the shore. Close enough to suckle but too close to escape. A delicate balance.

“Where do you think it all goes?” Utit’s thoughts had reached him as pictures and shapes, colors and sound. But the meaning had been clear. The symphony of her thoughts was always a pleasure.

“No idea. Perhaps it is still there, just out of sight, just out of reach.”

“That is no answer,” Utit had chided, the rusty taste of hydrogen and the bite of brilliant blue-white hazing the message.

“It is an answer. Just not the one you want.” His retort had carried an unintended bitter cold, but they both knew the situation, and Utit had taken no offense.

Utiti had guided his senses outward to the nearly complete blackness. Only a few stars remained, and the time-spot spun its furious dance.

“Imagine,” she had said, “there are other ponds out there with nothing to feed them. Just cold, empty holes. The universe has become a giant sieve. It must have all gone somewhere.”

Sirtot had left the statement unchallenged, unanswered.

“Someday I am going to find out the where. Before the cold closes in,” Utiti had finished.

Slowly sipping at the nectar of the nearby pond, Sirtot looked up. The black sky was vast and cold. Mere wisps of sound and static answered his stare. One lone star remained to keep the time-spot company. The two points were the only contrast to the solid velvet of his view.

Suddenly, at the edge of thought, the star blossomed. Sirtot concentrated, bringing the entirety of his consciousness to the site, to watch the final convulsions of the star venting its outer layers into the emptiness surrounding it. The sphere of glowing plasma spread its heat into space in beautiful reds, one last time. The hot iron core at the center, not large enough to collapse further, spun viciously. The rotating beacon of high-pitched sound rattled against Sirtot like pellets as it strafed him with radiation.

Sirtot knew how unlikely it was that a new black pond would form to add to his lone source of nourishment, but in these final days, hope had not quite died. He

basked momentarily in the expanding plasma, sensing its movement and absorbing its heat. It was so rare.

Later, after the plasma had stretched its darkening tendrils across the unending reaches, and indeed, no second pond had emerged, Sirtot returned his consciousness to his pond, a cool shoal in a frigid sea. Its rim had calmed since his trip. Reaching out he prodded surrounding dust and darkened lumps of dead star-stuff into its depths. The blue glow as they spiraled around and around, and finally in, cheered him. Slightly. If he listened carefully he could still feel the persistent ghost rhythms of the dead star in counterpoint to the time-spot. Both were slowing, deepening in pitch. As everything was.

Only a short way out from the pond the temperature dropped enough to cause him pain. Portions of his consciousness literally stopped, uncomprehending, swirling into mist. He jerked them back and warmed them by the glow of the pond's nearby blue ring. The pattering of particles slowly brought back sensation and, wantonly, he shoved more dust into the death spiral causing the geysers on both sides to spew out a colorful display. He knew it was a waste, but what difference did it make now? He witnessed the inward spiral of individual particles and waited out their near infinitesimal approach to infinity.

This game, too, grew tedious. Carefully guiding his pond, he began to move about in the darkness. He needed more dust. He needed more hardened cores. This area was now swept clean.

The cooling trend worsened. Reaching beyond the influence of his pond grew dangerous, but no less tempting. Indeed, the seductively cold bite of infinity seemed just beyond reach. Eventually it would cuddle up to him, an unwanted partner pool-side. Then he would simply stop. The true meaning of infinity—unending, unchanging.

Utiti would have argued that the pond itself was the gateway to infinity, but that wasn't the path he wished to risk.

Ultimately, one end or the other would win out.

Alone, his certainty that there were no others any longer grew shaky. He scanned his surroundings sporadically, vainly searching for more blue sparks. Homesteads: signs of life, signs of companionship, some echo of Utiti. Something he hadn't needed, hadn't even known he'd wanted, hadn't believed was important in a very long time. But Utiti had gone into the pond so many pulses ago that even the memories were pulling slowly apart.

As he searched, Sirtot remembered when stars still filled the skies. There had

been so much to taste, to hear, to create. There had been others like themselves: audiences, performers. But they were not essential then, and now there were none.

Sirtot remembered one performance particularly. Utit had placed their pond near the last star in a dead galaxy. As the last wisps of plasma were drained off into their pond, the performers had ridden on the slow spiral singing of their life, wrapping themselves in the plasma that shifted through a narrow color spectrum from red to blue before heading higher into the shorter and more brilliant sounds. He had watched, transfixed, until the plasma and the performers had tipped past the edge.

It had not occurred to him to ask them why.

That was not his purpose. His purpose was to observe, to watch, to allow it to happen by virtue of his observation. Inevitably, to remember.

Now, so much later, so many star-deaths later, he understood. When he'd watched the performance he'd had no comprehension of what was to come. Then, there had still been seemingly endless galaxies awaiting exploration. Not this persistent ebon void with only two slowly closing eyes to maintain the vigil and keep time. To what end learning the universe, to what end wandering the great vasties, if there was no one left to share what you'd tasted? As it cooled, as it died, what was there to keep him from taking the infinite spin down and run the shore around the maw of the pond? There would be little else to fuel it soon enough.

The time-spot finally spun down to nothing and had been guided into the pond. Only the dim eye of the final pulsing beat watched down upon him. For all he knew, that final star may have already died. It was far away, and he had kept no part of his consciousness focused upon it.

Sirtot looked down as a part of him dissolved and went wending toward the pond. The bits and pieces of his consciousness felt unsteady. He absently tried to pull other protons from his surroundings in an effort replace what had decayed, but there were none new. All had been around since the beginning, and they would all decay eventually.

He glanced at his pool and wondered if now would be a good time to take a dip.

Without warning he was suddenly *elsewhere*, the sounds different, the taste subtly wrong, the pond nowhere to be found. The cold rushed in at him, and then he was back by the feeble blue light of his shore amid the eternal night of his universe.

Then elsewhere again. He flitted about the universe as he decayed further. The cold slowly numbed his thoughts as each jump kept him from his pond.

Wait long enough and anything can happen, he thought to himself as his mad, undirected dance about the universe continued.

Suddenly all ponds were in the same place, all matter, the final spinning sun, and Sirtot. The greatest collection of mass since the beginning of the universe focused in twisted space. Before it could be elsewhere the mass and the black holes rushed in, Sirtot crushed among them. An impossibly dense white-hot point formed, and the universe whirled in about itself and shrank until even light disappeared. Sirtot, for the first time in untold pulses, was warm, then hot, then fluid, as his energy was made matter again.

With a great outrush it exploded, scattering Sirtot amid super-hot plasma. As he was spread out into the clouds his consciousness merged with the universe; he began to sense the others, returned. The performers from so long ago, minds he had shared passages of suns with, and Utit.

“It did lead to somewhere new!” Utit sang. The sweet taste of neutrinos and strings tangled in her thoughts. “Sirtot, I hope you join us soon.” Her thoughts darkened, her taste soured as she waited at the point from which she had emerged. But soon the sights and music and the warmth of the new universe distracted her. She rushed away as had the others.

He reached out to her to let her know he had never left but instead that she had stayed. Tendrils of golden plasma swirled at his effort. Utit danced around them and pulled others into a circle to enjoy the sound. He sang, and strings fluttered, he shouted and particles sped away, he screamed and light exploded. Each contortion only entertained them more as violet clouds of hot vapor began to clump and condense from his exertions, and Utit and the others watched and sang and whirled, enjoying the cacophony of creation.

But not one of them heard him, not even Utit.

His mood crackled and with it so did the plasma. The heat and colors ebbed, and fear blossomed in Utit’s mind. Fear? Sirtot was hit with a cold stab of understanding that became a dark rift deep in the clouds. Utit twisted and fled from the cold rumble of the blackness.

Sirtot controlled himself and the rift warmed; he understood. Utit slowed as the heat returned and was swept up by a group of performers herding potential stars, the great dance continuing. He smiled a chorus of x-rays that pulsed through the performers, tickling them into waves of laughter. Utit effervesced, sparkling brighter to him than everything else. Her energy was sweet in his thoughts but she didn’t

recognize his color all around her. He could taste himself in her memories, but he was now only a void in her awareness.

The rift began to rumble again deep in his mind as he felt the weight of his solitude. The memory of her fear was still shrill in his mind, he couldn't—wouldn't—do that again.

Her thoughts were inside him. Utit was inside him.

The rumble subsided.

He could watch her. He could swirl the new matter into displays to delight her.

He could still make her smile.