

## 1- The Birthday.

The universe began when an old woman accidentally dropped a lighted match into an open fireworks tin. Just before the big bang occurred, an old man stood on the stage next to her whispered *let there be light* into the darkness. And there was light, and an explosion that created everything.

After the intense fury of the blast, the old man looked unhopefully around for the old woman, but she had vanished. Inside the silver tin where the fireworks had been, he could see there was a tiny baby, wrapped up in the blue dress that the old woman had been wearing. The old man, Dennis, bent down and scooped the baby up from the metallic crib and swaddled her into his arms.

The stage that held the Father and the Daughter was in the centre of a sports field, in an Olympic stadium filled to the brim with frightened and confused spectators. As the smoke and dust cleared at this ground zero, there were shocked screams and the sounds of people crying. Thousands of awe-struck faces, turned dumbly to their new neighbours for comfort, only to find faces as awe-struck as their own, streaked with tears running from bright red eyes.

Dennis meanwhile, looked lovingly into his baby's beautiful face, torn between the grief of his losing the old woman, and the joy of this incredible new arrival. What would he call her this time? She had had so many names already.

I'll call you Melissa, he thought, this time.

Although Melissa was not a *new* arrival, exactly. Because the old woman had not *vanished*, exactly. The old woman had simply reverted back to infancy in an inexplicable trick of the light. She was a baby again, *born* again, somehow. And here she was, in his arms, gurgling. Looking very similar to when she had been born back

from old age the time before, and the time before that. Dennis spent a moment contemplating his Daughter's fate. Over millions of years he would watch her grow up and become mature and age and grow old while he stayed the same. And then, like so many times before, there would be some irresistible reason for them to have a celebratory firework display. During the firework display she would be distracted by a tiny Morse wink out in the blackness of space. At the moment of distraction, her wrinkled fingers would loosen their grip upon the match and gravity would (once again) work it free.

Visible beyond the stadium, the explosion was still creating a universe full of stars and planets and matter and antimatter. From its staggering enormity to its miniscule particulates. It was completely beautiful, like a child, wandering out, exploring the boundaries. Assuming that there were boundaries out there to explore.

Dennis mounted the small step up to the wooden lectern located to the edge of the stage. There was the microphone, pointed up and ready for him to speak. He made sure that Melissa was secure in the crook of his left arm before using his free index finger to tap twice upon the microphone's head. He cleared his throat. The crowd waited. He looked at the small pile of notes that he had made over the more recent repeats, laid out in a neat pile below the demanding point of the microphone. He shuffled through the papers, speed-reading the spidery runs of his fountain pen. What could he tell them?

"It's good," he mumbled, "the light is *good*."

He received a round of applause for this announcement, but the clapping was stilted and unsure. The crowd were nervous. There were murmurs.

Several thousand in the front rows began shuffling their own papers, anxiously preparing to take notes, as if what he was about to say to them would be of special significance, as if what he was about to say would be important enough to be recorded.

There were pockets of nervous chatter everywhere. The stadium hummed with enquiry.

Dennis had constantly racked his brains to find a memory of something *before* all this began. Before everything just kept on beginning, again and again, every thirteen and a half billion years or so. But the further back he went, the more repeats he found. It all had to have a beginning, at some point, surely? There had to be a *first* time, didn't there?

It was true, that very occasionally, when he really explored his memory during an extended period of meditation, he sometimes detected the traces that seemed to come from a different place. Perhaps they were memories from "before"? They were just tiny unidentifiable silvery flickers though, like the residue of a memory, rather than a memory itself. There was nothing tangible enough to flesh out and build substance around, no corridor of events or images through which he could peer. This whole situation was a mystery, and he seemed to be at the centre of it, somehow.

Beyond the stadium, there would be enough buildings, and there would be some stocks of food and drink that could be divided as many times as the population required and never quite run out. No one would go short during the interim period while industries were taken up and markets developed. There wouldn't be any real problems. A society could be and would be built. Shortages created conflict, that was clear from what he had observed, out there in the universes as they evolved.

Dennis stepped down from the stage and joined the crowds spilling out into the streets around the stadium. Like a huge moving choir, they were all singing the same song. No one seemed to care about how they all knew the words and the melody to the song they were singing. It was a song about a star, twinkling. Dennis sang loudly and marched with them. Their sun was coming up on a new morning. That was all that seemed to matter now. The collective mood had shifted, as it had done every time

before. Many people stopped to talk with Dennis and take a closer look at the baby in his arms. Melissa gabbled and cooed to their delight. No one he encountered asked the fundamental questions about life and the universe any more. It was all about the baby, where she and Dennis lived on Island d'Loonn, and whether he had all the equipment necessary for rearing. Did he require help, advice, or perhaps a babysitter? Did he have the facilities to sterilise all the bottles that she would require for feeding, what with no mummy on the scene? Did she require changing? There was some comedic sniffing of the air. He thanked them in turn for their support and reassured them that for now at least, he had everything that he needed.

The Olympic stadium was located near one of Dennis' favourite beaches. He walked along the coastal road and trudged across the sands with Melissa still in the crook of his arm until they were alone. He felt relieved to be free of the crowds for a while. The morning was warm. He sat down and carefully laid the sleeping Melissa beside him on the fine grains where his shadow shaded her from the sun. He adjusted the folds of the blue dress. She wasn't too warm or too cold.

The sea advanced and retreated, constantly adjusting the shape of the Island d'Loonn. There was a salty tang in the air as spray was carried in on the breezes. Dennis' brown robe covered his legs in a pleasing way. His large beard swept down towards his belly reassuringly. The robe and the beard together made him feel secure. He stared up into the sky as the newly created stars disappeared into the deep sunlit blue. He thought about the firework display. He recalled the last moments with his Daughter as the old woman, Naomi, before the Morse wink in the blackness, before the tumbling match and the accidental universe, before she disappeared back in time (along with everyone and everything else except for him). He sometimes wondered whether it might be less painful if he were wiped clean also, so that he could begin again and

again, rather than living with the cumulative grief of loss.

Then he felt something in the sand, digging into his right buttock. A pinch or a prick of something. He shuffled his body slightly, trying to get comfortable, but it was still there, nibbling. He shifted his weight over onto his left side and fumbled around in the sand with his right hand, trying to clear it. He sat back down and for a moment he thought it was gone, but no, there it was, nagging and niggling at his bottom again. The ridiculousness of his predicament made him smile. The universe had just began. He was wrestling with some serious questions. But still, here he was having his bottom pinched by some rogue shell or pebble! His amusement was soon replaced by irritation, though. All he wanted to do was run over the events of the previous day in his mind, quietly and without incident. Was that so much to ask? He shifted his weight to the left again. Craning around, he could see a tiny square of something in the sand, the culprit, obviously. He reached down and picked it up. It was a small curved piece of ceramic, about half an inch squared. It was the same colour and texture as the firework casings, so recently exploded.

He turned the piece over in his fingers, expecting to see part of the familiar rows of symbols that covered the casings of all the fireworks. But instead, there was a single word written on it. That's odd, Dennis thought. The word only had four letters. And one piece of punctuation. He read out loud, shaking his head in confusion.

“Help!”

Dennis stared at the word as the sun arced over the sky through the course of the day. He gradually shifted the bundle of sleeping Melissa around, keeping her in his shadow.

I am an eclipse, he thought.

Nothing out there was evolved enough to write a message yet! So *who* had

written it? Was it someone on the Island d'Loonn? Perhaps it was Naomi who had written it? With a horrid grip of fear he wondered if *he* had written the message to himself, somehow, from a future that he could not reach, being constantly dragged back to the beginning again every however many years. But this was ridiculous! The handwriting wasn't his, for a start.

“Okay,” Dennis said. “What do you think, Melissa?”

Melissa was awake. He could see the minor fluctuations in her face. She was brewing up, getting ready to begin being a baby proper. There was always a honeymoon period at the beginning of the universe where she was on a kind of pause, perhaps to allow him to complete his duties in talking with the crowds. He didn't really know why. She just spent her first hours in a relatively quiet stillness. He made the most of it! Dennis chuckled to himself. Perhaps she knew how loud she was going to be and was taking a deep breath before she began? Soon she would be crying and require a constant carousel of feeding and changing and cuddling.

The sun began its descent, yellowing and orangng and reddening as it sank towards the horizon.

“Well, my girl, I'm going to keep my eyes peeled. There might be *other* ceramic fragments around the place with more words on them!”

Melissa stared back, her eyes widening.

“And you can help me find them.”

Dennis stood up and carefully dusted the sand away from his robe. He bent down and scooped up Melissa into his arms. She was on the threshold now. The howl of life was poised upon her lips. Dennis smiled down at his Daughter and smacked his lips together to make a kiss. He made some noises that weren't words. Perhaps he could appease her briefly with gestures and soft sounds?

“Help!” Dennis thought, chuckling to himself again. It was time to go home and begin the business of Fathering. There was so much to think about. He gave the sea one last contemplative look. Already a flotilla of sailboats bounced upon the waves, some distance out, their sails making dorsal silhouettes. They faded and disappeared as darkness completely arrived.

Dennis held Melissa slightly closer to him as the air cooled. He turned towards the lights of civilisation twinkling to life on Island d’Loonn, and began a determined trudge back across the sand towards them.