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Alone in the Universe

by Dan MacLean

It sounded innocent enough: "A lecture on the Origin of the Universe," the brochure said. It was to be given by a professor from the Department of Astronomy at the University of Chicago. I'd always wondered where the universe came from, so I signed up.

The hall was a third full when I arrived, and I instinctively sat in the back to avoid being called on. I didn't want to appear ignorant about a place I'd been living all my life. As I sat there watching the room fill to capacity, I noticed that the seats filled in mainly from the back forward. It appeared I wasn't the only one who wanted to avoid embarrassment.

Despite this, I could sense an air of anticipation and excitement in the room. We were at last going to learn one of the mysteries of our existence: Where did we come from? And more importantly: Were we alone?

The occasion moved me to write a few lines of verse on the back of my program, a commemoration of sorts. I entitled it: The Universe.

Where did we all come from?
Where are we all going?
It really doesn't matter
If the winds of time are blowing.
Or we leave here in a limousine,
Mercedes, Ford or hearse.
The answer's here for all of us
The U - N - I - V - Erse

At the final stroke of my pen, the house lights dimmed and the professor began his talk. He was my age, fiftyish, with a style that simultaneously exuded tremendous confidence and massive insecurity in the same breath. And no wonder; here was a person who had spent his entire professional life studying the first one one-thousandth of a second after the big bang.

On one hand, how can anyone know anything about the first one one-thousandth of a second of

anything, especially something that happened before your great-grandparents were out of diapers? And, if you did know something, who's going to argue with you?

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't so hard to know everything about such a tiny speck of eternity. Maybe there was some trick to it like one of those brainteasers where you wrack yourself for hours only to find the answer right in front of your nose. Maybe the insecurity came from him not wanting us to find out he'd staked his career on a trick.

Sensing, I'm sure, the same questions in all of us, the professor began by explaining exactly how you do study such things. There were no shortcuts, no mind games. This stuff was mega-difficult. At first, I got the drift of what he was saying, but soon my brain began to access fading screens from high school chemistry and physics: How do particles interact? Can I feel the solar wind? What are the properties of boron anyway? It was stuff I thought I'd never need, and now found myself try-



Photo by Joel Kendall



ing to call up, like some rich uncle I hadn't spoken to in years, and asking for a loan.

Aha! I thought, suddenly lifted from the mire of the periodic table. There is something I understand. His visuals. His visual aids were spectacular, not the computer-generated ones, the charts and tables that told us he was an old friend with his mouse and keyboard, but rather the ones he had drawn by hand. He'd used a wide range of colors to create planetary and cosmic formations on transparencies and flip charts. The colors, combined with his artwork, gave each visual the impact of a comic-book cover. I was mega-impressed.

I wanted to know where he got his markers. I knew from years of my own business presentations that most markers don't stick to transparencies, and those that do tend to be in a limited range of four or five colors. The professor was using dozens. I had to know his source.

At the end of his talk, the professor invited questions from the audience. I raised my hand and waited patiently until the professor turned in my direction. I assumed it was my turn, although a boy of about twelve stood in front of me. I'd guessed that he was with one of the adults and didn't figure he'd have a question. The professor thought otherwise. "Yes, son," he said, "was there something on your mind?" There was.

"I've been thinking a lot about the origin of the universe myself," he said.

Oh really, I thought. I looked at the boy more closely. He was wearing a white shirt and horn-rimmed glasses. He was overweight. There didn't appear to be a pencil-protector in his shirt pocket, but there should have been. He was a replica of the kid who sat in front of me in eighth-grade science; the kid who kept his mouth shut until he could utter something really smart; something that sounded as if it had been written for him by an adult. ". . . and I've been developing my own origin theory over the past several years," he said, arms folded across his chest, eyes narrowing in deep concentration.

For the past several years, I thought. That would place the origin of this kid's origin theory somewhere around kindergarten, a time when I was trying to develop a theory to explain who painted that big circle on the floor.

"And I'd like to know what you think," he went on, not the least constrained by the possibility he was about to attack the life's work of a man five times his age, with a brain that had yet to deal with the problem of how to get a date for the junior prom.

"My theory holds that the origin of the universe has more to do with the singularity of black holes and their propensity to warp both time and space amid conditions approaching a vacuum at absolute zero . . . blah, blah, blah, blah . . ."

He continued, but my brain blew a fuel cell on "singularity," and I was stuck on the launching pad as the kid's discourse disappeared into lunar orbit.

Where'd he come up with this stuff? I asked myself. Then a more troubling question arose. What am I going to say when the kid is done? Am I supposed to follow up on the "singularity of black holes," or "warp time," or "a vacuum at absolute zero," with "Where did you get your markers?"

I considered passing. I could say the kid asked the question I was going to ask, but dismissed that idea because it could invite further questions of me. I panicked. The kid was done. The professor had practically guaranteed him a scholarship to the University of Chicago, and there I stood with the only question that made any sense to me, about to reveal the vacuum in my head in front of this kid and everyone else. I imagined the laughter echoing off Pluto.

The professor turned to me. "Yes," he said. I stood there feeling like a refugee from a place where they put all the planets nobody wants. I was praying for a black hole to warp time and space and get me out of there.

One thing I'd learned for sure. In this universe, I was completely alone.

