

SIX WEEK SLEEP

by Paul Phillips

Simon Stearman slept.

He was famous for it: the length of the sleep (six weeks!) and the earth-shattering revelation he was able to announce when he woke up.

Of course he was already famous, being the professor with the world's brainiest brain, itself supplemented by the world's fastest exocortex, itself designed by Professor Stearman, himself... but this was different.

He had fallen asleep on the day bed in his study on the Cambridge Torus - and woken a thousand hours later having cracked paraluminal travel.

How? "Simple, Graham," he would say. "Everything from Einstein to the energy requirements and the engineering tells us that we can't go faster than light, that it's a race we cannot win. So we don't run it. We cheat. We go in the dark."

A nervous giggle from the Hollywood starlet to his left. He shifted his buttocks on the sofa to throw her an indulgent smile.

“Dark space, I mean, of course; AKA the darkness, the absence, the ether. It’s self-evident that the universe is bound together by it. Without it the sums don’t add up. The suns,” he added with a sly pout, to rapturous applause.

“Once we had discovered its properties, or rather its lack of dimensional physical constants, it was only a matter of time – of spacetime, if you will – before someone realised that if you can’t c , you can do anything.”

“No speed of light in the dark.”

“Yah, exactly, Graham. And no restrictions. So all it took was for someone – who happened to be me – to come up with the way of accessing the dark by means of what we’ve called a Samara event.”

“Sub-Atomic Momentum Angle Re-Alignment?”

“Something like that. I believe the S now stands for Spin, but the point is the same. One becomes sufficiently inspatial to filter through the shroud – what people once thought of as the impermeable fabric of the continuum.”

“The shroud is composed of dark matter?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“And beyond is dark space?”

“Well, in the popular vernacular – though that would have to be ‘space’ in a very contradictory sense. You do realise that in spite of the language all this is much more easily understood in terms of waves not particles...”

“So anyway, Professor, tell us more about your mission, and your ship, the... the...?”

“And Then He Woke Up. It seemed appropriate.”

“It seems incredible – actually to attempt to travel back to the origins of the universe and to try to see...”

“Not to see. Remember? No c...”

“Oh yes – well, to experience...”

“Yah. It’s waves again, I’m afraid. One could say *listen...*”

“To listen to the Big Bang itself!”

“Indeed. Well, Graham, I don’t mind telling you...”

But the starlet was talking again, her skinny fingers tapping on his thigh as though it were a reception bell.

“I’m sorry, Professor Stearman, I don’t mean to interrupt, but I’m a little confused...”

“Of course my dear...”

“It’s a truism that stargazing is looking back into the past, and I understand the temptation to extrapolate from that - but you speak of physically travelling back to a point from which the universe began, as though the Big Bang were an explosion into some other kind of space, some greater reality, rather than a rapid expansion – and then inflation – of everything. I mean... the universe is *isotropic*, yes?”

“Well...”

Oh - flash forward! Inflation indeed!

(Inflate this, darling!)

And flash forward, in particular, to the *And Then He Woke Up*, as it slips inarticulate through the weft of the shroud to dance unstrictly with Delta-v. Her two-man crew – actually a man and a woman – consists of the Professor himself and his

beautiful research assistant, who looks a lot like the Hollywood starlet but in a good way and whose name is Eva, pronounced *Ever*.

(But no, never. And that's not how population genetics works.)

It's snug in here. The ship is all engine; even in the dark, one can't entirely shake off that dancing partner. The layout of the dim-lit flight deck is such that his assistant is seated slightly lower and forward of him. When she turns to address him he can see down her top.

"Professor, that's 13.8 billion light years. We should be coming up to the inflationary horizon."

"Thank you, Eva."

She gives him a look.

"I know, my dear. I was thinking the same thing. According to this mapping of the cosmic background radiation, the horizon occurs at 10 factorial seconds from the singularity. The universe exploded into being, then went to sleep for that period before beginning its exponential expansion – as though mulling over whether it could, or whether it dared. Obviously there's no comparing the experience of time then with ours now, it was on such a curve it was effectively instantaneous, but the units are the same and..."

"And 10 factorial seconds is exactly six weeks."

He feels a surge of pride in his voluptuous young assistant. Their eyes meet; then a warning tone draws hers back to the screen.

"Did you hear something? There? Listen... it did it again."

“Yes Professor. The computer has detected a pattern in the microwave background – a pulse.”

“Regular?”

“No – sequences. Putting it on speaker.”

The sound of static is somehow basal and fizzy at the same time, with a kind of emerging rhythm, like a waking steam engine or a pointed sigh, repeated, in the dark.

“Professor, it’s an attempt at communication. It’s teaching us an alphabet. Processing... Professor, it’s a message!”

“What does it say?”

“STOP NO FURTHER.”

“Just that, like that? No punctuation? No exclamation mark to indicate that it’s a warning sign, rather than a memo?”

“Nothing, unless you factor in the factorial function itself. That’s an exclamation mark.”

A warning sign? Or a memo – note to self?

It would depend which way you were heading.

Or perhaps not.

Stearman felt an icy touch, colder than the starlet’s fingers, trace a low frequency wave along his spine. He jumped, as though someone had shaken him, but it was just Eva, calling his name. Wasn’t it?

“Simon? Simon!”

That was odd. Although insistent, her voice sounded strangely muffled, and it was getting hard to see or even to picture her face. The thought occurred to him that the dark was leaking into the cabin.

What?

“Did you hear something?” she said. “There? Listen...”

“The inflation pause...” and now that sounded like his own voice, from far, far away. “The cosmic...”

“Oh shit!”

“What...?”

“It’s the bin men – AND WE FORGOT TO PUT THE BINS OUT!”

“Huh...?”

The ship was rocking violently, rolling and yawing, as though caught in a dark space analogue of a gravity well. Those subdued cockpit lights burned alarmingly bright all of a sudden and she was shaking him again, calling his name – not Eva, not Eva – his wife.

And then -