

The Fermi Panic

by strannikov

Schrödinger's Cat, Maxwell's Demon, and Popov's Ghost (alternating hands with Faddeev's Ghost) reconvened one afternoon after years of separation for a few games of canasta, the Cat was ahead when talk turned to the outbreak of the Fermi Panic far below.

"Can't say the imbeciles weren't warned," Popov's Ghost tut-tutted, at almost the same moment Faddeev's Ghost concurred. Maxwell's Demon chewed his cigar and grunted at Popov's Ghost's observation and Faddeev's Ghost's concurrence, while eyeing the Cat's play.

Schrödinger's Cat twitched and nodded as he picked up the discards, casting his mind back to 2014, when local confidence seemed at its peak: "Within twenty years we'll've found an exoplanet suitable for human habitation, no matter how close or far away, and we'll probably've found alien life, though not necessarily intelligent life," the astrophysical prophecy of the day had gone.

Yet 2034 came and went as had all the intervening years of devastating warfare and plague, disasters natural and unnatural, and unabated technogenic climate change, all the fresh misery occurring and intervening since 2014, to say nothing of what earlier had accumulated since 1814 or 1764. No sign of any exoplanet fit for human habitation, no sign of any exoplanet awash in salty seas and freshwater lakes, no sign of any exoplanet of the right size with a suitable atmosphere, no sign of any exoplanet with a suitable atmosphere and mild temperatures, no unambiguous sign of biological ferment active anywhere other than upon the planet known to one and all came to pass in those twenty brief years, with sadness or no, with relief or no, no sign of any alien intelligent life friendly or hostile. As a diversion, the Terran Planetary Society launched in 2035 two missions for the asteroid belt and the Kuiper Belt to inventory the volume and quality of fresh ice in the distant zones for possible mining.

Only by 2044 did it begin dawning on the global public that the thirty-year-old prediction had come to naught. The continuous astronomical searching had come to reveal only that if any habitable exoplanet should ever be found in the vast realm of baryonic matter, it would be far enough afield in the galaxy so's not to permit visitation or settlement for tens of centuries or hundreds of millennia, if then.

It was the centennial observance of Fermi's blabbing about his execrable paradox that led Schrödinger's Cat, Faddeev's Ghost (oscillating continuously with Popov's Ghost), and Maxwell's Demon to make their recent visit perfectly unobserved. Their "Stars Just Out of Reach" whispering campaign exceeded many expectations.

"Not only does this continue to mean that the aliens are not lurking out there with eager philanthropic zeal," the trio managed to insinuate into every human cranium entertaining the enduring anomaly of the Fermi Paradox (Faddeev's Ghost and Popov's Ghost never strictly astride semi-baryonic instantiation at any given moment), "no, nay nay: the future of the human race itself does not exist, either, otherwise visitors from Earth's far future would be dropping in for coffee and games of canasta on an hourly basis, regaling one and all with vivid tales of the many marvels of human existence that time-traveling technology could afford from distant millennia and millions of years of further evolution! No one living among us is from 'the Future', no no no, nothing of the sort! No word from anyone, not one word, not the least glimmer of a credible sign.

"If you disbelieve even now, listen quietly to the enduring silence! The heavenly spheres have no music and no solace to impart. Listen to what you are not hearing! You hear no response from any beyond of distant space or distant future, only the perplexing and continuing silence warned by the Fermi Paradox.

"Despite SETI, despite Voyager probes, despite the Hubble Telescope, despite International Space Stations, despite microwave anisotropy probes, despite hadron colliders large and small, despite fledgling lunar colonies, despite asteroid belt and Kuiper Belt

missions, despite all accumulated astronomical and robotic exploratory data going back decades and centuries: not one encouraging word from anyone, not one offer of cosmic mentoring or intervention or advice from future benefactors, no one from the twenty-fourth century, no one from the fortieth century, not one squeak of galacto-temporal admonition or trans-temporal recognition ever! Week adds to week, month to month, soon another year, another decade, another century—and for all these efforts: no reply, no response, no answer, no word, nothing.”

The trio with its alternating membership was not given to bragging, and it was next to impossible to say which of the three (more or less) afflicted the largest number of human crania: but thanks to their efforts, the dispiriting notion spread worldwide that the vast realm of baryonic matter was empty of all intelligent life but the paltry human variety, that the baryonic realm possessed no future with any substantive existence of its own (human or otherwise), and the perplexing, enduring silence warned by the execrable Fermi Paradox became unendurable.

Not one specimen of humanity survived, squalling infants left behind all expired within a month, and so it would remain impossible to show whether what erupted as the Fermi Panic in late April 2058 was the epistemic or cognitive expression of a lurking genetic disposition to species-wide suicide.

The three (by this time Faddeev's Ghost had retreated into the maw of a local gravitational anomaly) chuckled in good humor as the Cat won yet another round of canasta, and as all three evaporated into yet deeper realms of non-baryonic existence, the Cat's smile did in fact linger briefly.

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