

Futures

Friendship and other anomalous results

It's no joke. By P H Lee



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

After the flush of discovery, after the headlines, after the pronouncements of our glorious new future, after the statements to the UN and the press and the soaring language about “all humanity”, after the papers have been published, the prizes awarded, the careers minted, the actual business of alien contact isn’t glamorous. It is methodical, frustrating and, above all, boring. In short, it is the work of graduate students.

Which is why I was spending a perfectly good Saturday in April – one of the first sunny days we’d had all year! – in a windowless room in the basement of the Alexander Library, reviewing physics papers from the early ’80s with no one but my Whirligig counterpart for company.

Jennifer wasn’t bad company, as far as Whirligigs went. She was willing to at least make an effort, which was more than I could say for any of her predecessors. Jen had a personal interest in humans; she’d even picked a human

name and gender. But she was, in the end, a conglomerate organism, antisocial towards anyone who wasn’t already part of herself. The point is that, for all her interest in humans, Jennifer still kept mostly to her side of the room, a swarm of helicoptering seed pods conversing in lightning flashes that I couldn’t even look at without risking a seizure.

I’m serious about the seizures. You’d think they would have exempted me, but Dr Viswanathan was very clear that I needed to “be a team player” and that she’d “really appreciate it”.

Anyway, there we were, going through a stack of journal articles, comparing our species’ “scientific and cultural knowledge”. The exchanges so far had mostly been one-way, which wasn’t surprising. The Whirligigs had both interstellar travel and a million years of scientific and cultural development. But there were still contributions from us, too, things that the Whirligigs enjoyed, such as rainier cherries or Andrew Lloyd Webber. Not exactly an even trade for centuries’ worth of scientific

and technological development, but at least it was something.

We’d made it most of the way into 1982 when Jennifer flickered back into activity. “Steffie,” she vibrated, “what’s First Results from a Superconductive Detector for Moving Magnetic Monopoles?”

“Oh, that!” I said. Jen would probably like the joke. “It’s a funny story, actually. This lab built a loop of superconducting wire, you see? If a magnetic monopole passes through the loop, the loop retains a fixed charge.”

“Of course,” vibrated Jennifer. “But you didn’t detect anything.”

“Well that’s the thing,” I said. “Within a couple of days of turning it on, they detected a magnetic charge. So for years we kept expecting another one. But no one ever found anything. Just a fluke.”

Jen started flashing very fast. Nervous, I looked away, but kept talking. “A lot of people were convinced, though. They detected it on Valentine’s day, so someone even wrote

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a poem a year later: Roses are red / Violets are blue / Now is the time / For monopole two.”

Jen didn't respond. I looked up and immediately wished I hadn't. I'd never seen a Whirligig this active, every seed pod spinning so fast I could hear them whistling. She was so diffuse she practically filled the room. “It's just a joke –” I said, before realizing I needed to shut my mouth before I swallowed one of her.

Eventually she settled down. “They – detected something?” she asked.

“Yeah, but only once. It must have been an error.”

“Is there anything else that would generate that specific charge, though?”

“Jen, it's just one result. Science is about repeated experimentation.” Human science, anyway.

More flashing and spinning. I put my hands over my eyes and waited it out.

“There is no ‘monopole two’,” she finally buzzed. “Because there's only one monopole!” “What?”

“There's only one monopole in the Universe.” Several of her seed pods helicoptered over to the white board and began testing the

pens. She finally found a blue one with some ink and began writing in Whirligig notation. I struggled to keep up. “The – what do you call it? – inflationary process only produces ...”

I scrambled for my notebook, scratching notes as fast as I could, mumbling along: “OK, right, sure.” Then it clicked. “Jen, are you seriously saying that there is a single magnetic monopole in the entire Universe, and it just happened to pass through this particular physics lab the week after they turned on their detector?”

She vibrated rapidly. “Oh-em-gee-dou-bleyou-tee-eff! You humans found the magnetic monopole! And less than 100 years ago! It's within 100 light years! And no one knew –” Several of her seed pods, still flashing, dived into my hair.

I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

“Steffie, is that amusement? This isn't a joke, I promise.”

I tried to explain, but it only made me laugh harder. Jen was concerned. “Do I need to request medical care?”

I waved her off.

Finally, still wheezing, I said “I spent all this

time, all this money. And it turns out that the discovery of my career is from reading 90-year-old journal articles in a library basement.”

“Oh,” said Jennifer. “Me, too.” I'm not sure if the pulsing wave was her version of laughing, but seeing it was enough to get me going again.

In the end, though, we barely got a footnote. Jennifer's integrator swarm took the lion's share of the credit, and Dr Viswanathan took the rest. But when their journal article was published – with our footnote! – Jennifer and I still went out for ice cream. I ordered mint chip; she got cherry vanilla. I splurged on the fresh-made waffle cones. We toasted each other.

“To physics,” I said. “And anomalous results.”

“To friendship,” vibrated Jennifer. “To aliens.”

PH Lee lives atop an old walnut tree behind a rose-flower hedge at the edge of town. They have appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Clarksworld* and *Uncanny Magazine*. With special thanks to Steffie Thayil

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

PH Lee reveals the inspiration behind *Friendship and other anomalous results*.

The scientific endeavour is littered with anomalous results: some compelling, some confusing, some bizarre. Most of these are simple laboratory error, but some of them are hints to something more, knowledge that is beyond our current scientific imagination. If someone with some outside perspective could see them, maybe that person could show us the truth behind them.

In this story, I've used my favourite anomalous result, the Valentine's day monopole. And to do it justice, I've paired it with the truest of outside perspectives: alien contact.

Alien contact would offer a truly outsider perspective: a chance to offer our thoughts and assumptions and discoveries and see what some totally different people, with totally different experiences and even different senses and cognition, have discovered on their own. That outside perspective would be enormously valuable; it might well be the greatest value of alien contact. It is certainly, among humans, the value of friendship.

