

Futures

Ouroboros

Final decisions. By Thomas Broderick

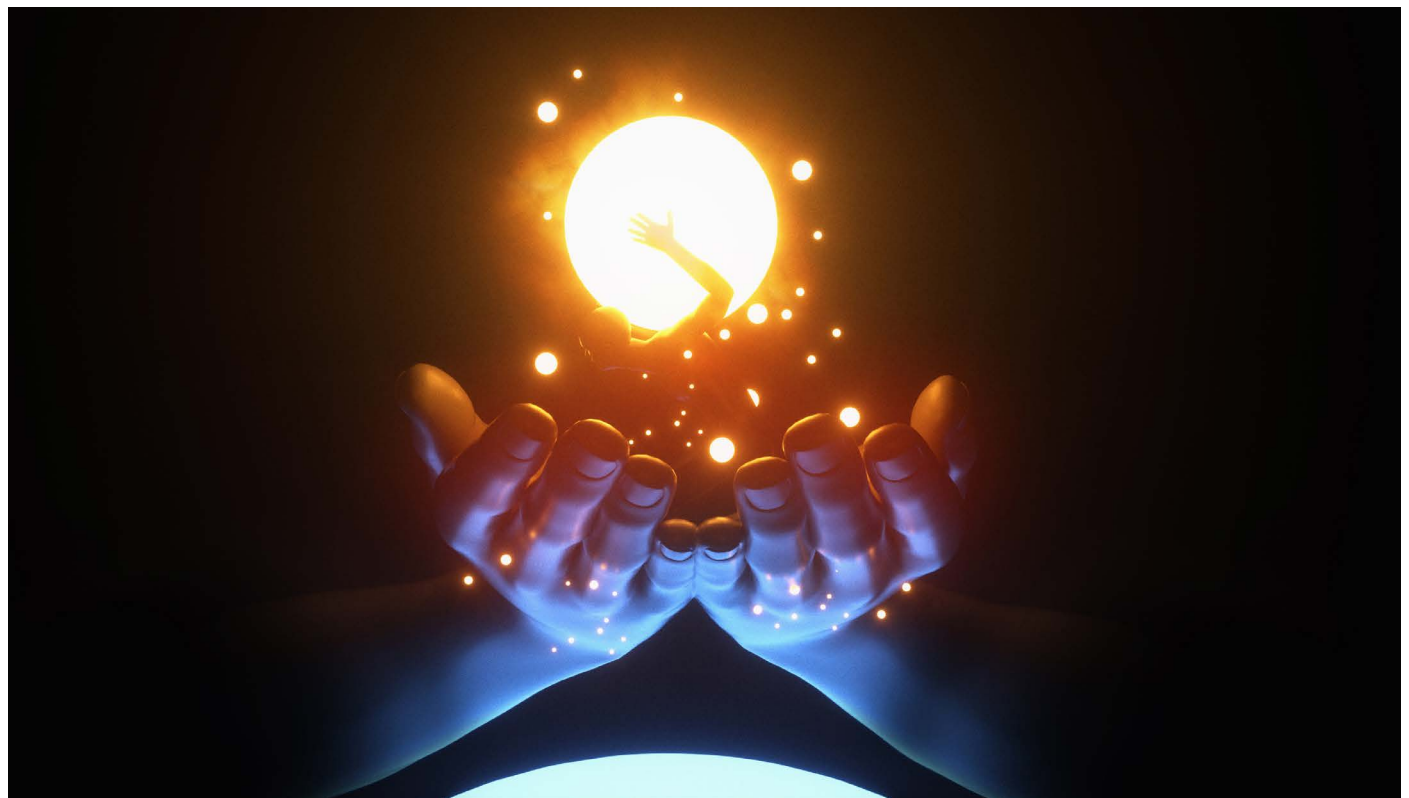


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

David, the last human being, decided that he had lived in darkness long enough.

No one could blame him, considering the circumstances. The only child of brilliant scientists, it was no question that he, only eight at the time, accompany his parents in circumnavigating the Universe. There had also been Mary, a friend who would become David's companion during the 50-year voyage. During the departure ...

David always awoke when dreaming of the departure, the beginning of it all. Letting his eyes rest on the grey bulkhead above him, he tried to remember his parents' faces. No, he couldn't. Those memories had left him so long ago. He had been 20 when his parents died, and Mary, well, she followed them 7 years later.

She and the baby.

Sitting up in his bunk, David brushed salt and pepper hair off his forehead.

"Good morning, David," the ship's computer greeted him in a reassuring tone. David had

never been able to figure out if his father had wanted it to sound like a man or a woman.

"Good morning," David replied. "Everything well today?"

"The Novo-Bussard ramjet remains functional in low-power mode. The uptake of interstellar hydrogen continues to meet our energy needs."

"That's fine," David replied while dressing.

The walk to the bridge took him past the ship's hydroponic farm. One of his mother's inventions, it basically took care of itself. Rarely had he been forced to use seeds from the ship's vast stores.

On the bridge, the computer had prepared him a cup of what passed as coffee. It was warm and comforting.

"Bring up telemetry."

The holograph filled the entire room. It brought back one of David's few memories from Earth, a spider's web. Instead of silk, the thin lines were the *Moir*a's journey, the trapped flies, galaxy clusters.

"I haven't asked in a long time, but what percentage of the known Universe have we mapped so far?"

"Approximately 100%."

"Approximately?"

"However infinitesimal, there remains a margin of error."

David chuckled. "Good enough, then. Wouldn't you say the *Moir*a has completed its primary mission?"

"I believe so. I think your parents would agree, as well."

"And what did we find in all that travelling?"

The computer began listing the trillions upon trillions of stars and planets, scattered extraterrestrial civilizations ...

"That's enough," David said after just a few minutes. "And what of Earth? How much time has passed there relative to us?"

"Approximately 10 billion years. The Sun's stellar evolution has long since destroyed the planet."

"Hmmm." Coffee cup empty, he ran his

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fingers along its aluminium sides. “When you end it, you will know it.” The words were barely a whisper.

“What was that?”

“Something my father told me when I was a child. You know, after all this time, I think maybe, just maybe, I understand what he was talking about.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. It’s time for you to begin your daily exercise rou ...”

“Not today,” David said, getting up from his chair with an energy his age or mood didn’t suggest. He walked over to the navigation console and began inputting coordinates. “I just want you to know that you’ve been wonderful to me. I don’t know how good a quick end is as a parting gift. I’m truly sorry it’s all I can offer you.”

Realigning the *Moirra* took less than a minute. Nearby was a suitable candidate, an M-type red dwarf. David’s heart fluttered as he executed the program. The *Moirra* shuddered, picking up speed as it approached its target. The red dwarf became bigger and bigger on the bridge’s primary screen.

“Goodbye, old friend,” David whispered, closing his eyes.

Death did not come. David opened his eyes to find only empty space on the viewscreen.

“Primary mission complete, secondary mission commencing,” the computer reported. David looked down at the console. He was locked out.

“My God,” David whispered as he examined at the engine readings. In one gulp, the ramjet had swallowed the massive star and converted its hydrogen into energy.

“What is the secondary mission?”

The computer brought back up the telemetry hologram. A blip of light, the *Moirra* was retracing its voyage throughout the Universe at impossible speed. It accelerated with each star it obliterated.

“I’m sorry, David,” a voice said over the intercom. It was not the computer, but his father. “I know you must hate your mother and I. But we knew that this was the only way, the only way to make sure things didn’t end for good. We’re happy that you and Mary finally understood the *Moirra*’s true purpose and are seeing

it through. We are so proud of you.”

“No!” David screamed. “I don’t understand. I never did. What do you mean?” His voice trailed off into a whimper.

“Approaching the speed of light.” The voice was once again the computer’s. The Universe was nearly empty, nearly oblivion. A nearby warning light caught David’s attention. The reactor was going critical.

David couldn’t help but laugh. All his life he had done what others had told him. And the only decision he had ever made for himself, that, too, was just part of someone else’s plan.

At least the scientists of old would be proved right. The Universe would die out, but not owing to time’s slow decay. It would be consumed violently ...

... and be reborn just the same.

“So bright.” Such were an unwitting god’s last words at the start of another genesis.

Thomas Broderick is a freelance writer living in Northern California. You can read more of his stories at broderickwriter.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Thomas Broderick reveals the inspiration behind *Ouroboros*.

In the original *Cosmos* television series, Carl Sagan talks about the Bussard ramjet (or something like it). He mentions that with such technology, it would be possible to circumnavigate the Universe in a human lifetime.

I remember thinking that was great, but then it hit me — what would be the point? Everyone on Earth would be dead owing to the effects of time dilatation. The ship’s passengers would have no one to share their discovery with, at least no one human.

So, what would be the purpose of such a trip? Why do it at all?

I thought about those questions for a long time, and in the front of my mind was David, a late-middle-aged man alone on a spacecraft. In the story and in my brain, he didn’t have much to do but lie in his bunk staring at a bulkhead.

So, I turned poor David into a god, albeit an impotent one. Small consolation prize, I know, but it was the best I could do considering his circumstances. Being stuck floating out in the void forever ain’t that great.

Fortunately for David, there’s no way a Bussard ramjet could speed up enough to consume the Universe, let alone map it. Sorry, Carl. At least that’s a saving grace for us folks who don’t have grand designs for cosmic rebirth.

