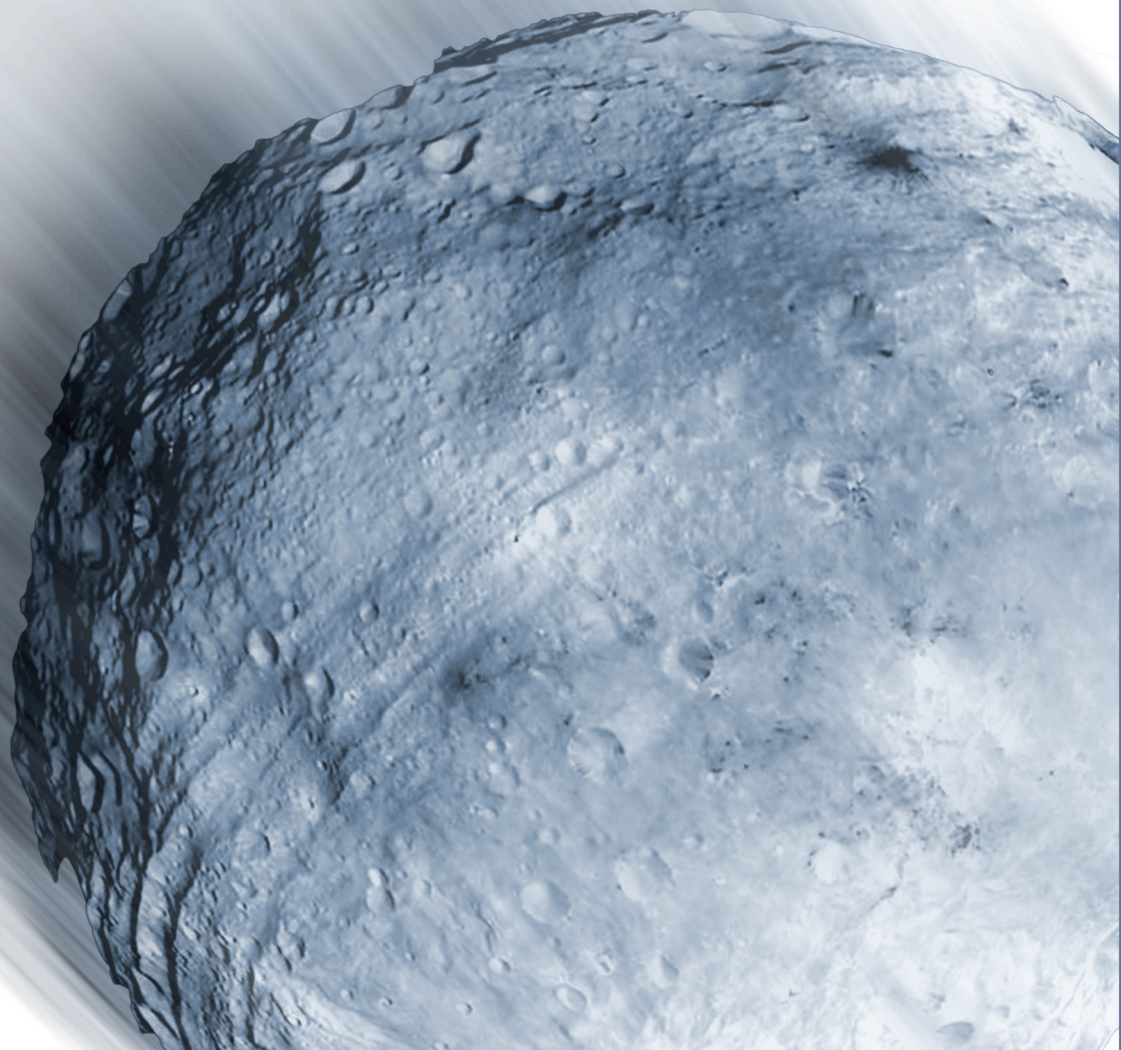


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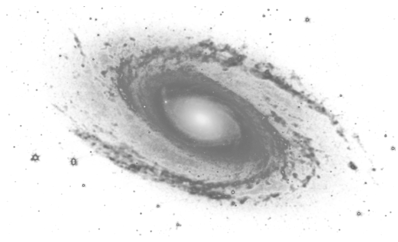
I, Demiurge



I, Demiurge

A Short Story
by

M. M. Bygrove



Entry 86

Yesterday I went with Tau to see a new spec-sim. It was all about this alien species landing on our planet and how things changed afterwards. I didn't really like it. I have to admit, the simulation was very realistic, and the logic was tight throughout too, but still. Then again, I'm generally not that into speculative pieces. I guess I can't really enjoy them knowing they're not true. I much prefer nature sims and that kind of thing.

But Tau liked it. He said the sim artist who made it was becoming very famous.

Entry 87

I've been working in my garden a lot. For a while now I've had this idea, but I still don't quite know how to go about it. It's a rather unusual modification that I have in mind.

So far I've run all the possible calculations and I'm quite positive that what I want to do won't have any disagreeable consequences, neither for the plants nor the environment. I just don't exactly know how to execute it. I've been experimenting, but nothing yet. I think I'm on the right track though.

The big moon is up tonight. I can see it's light penetrating all the way down here. I might swim up to have a look.

Entry 88

I talked to Tau about my idea. I was hoping he might help me out, but he didn't have

any suggestions. Not sure if he appreciated the concept at all. He seemed preoccupied by some asteroid that's been detected.

Isn't it interesting how these fatalistic theories come up every now and again? Those end-of-the-world prophecies involving asteroids, or stars burning out, or aliens attacking, or some such catastrophe? Why is it that some look up to the sky and, instead of seeing beauty, they see horror? Maybe it's those spec-sims, filling their heads with all sorts of crazy scenarios.

Personally, I think it's silly. If we start fearing the stars, we might as well fear the water, or ourselves.

Entry 89

I had an idea how to go about the modification that I had in mind — I think I was missing an enzyme to catalyze the reaction. It'll be more difficult than anything I've done before. I'm spending most of my time in the garden experimenting.

Entry 90

Today all everyone talked about was this asteroid. Apparently it's huge and supposed to be on a collision course with our planet.

I don't know.

My leptognition isn't that good, and I can't detect neutrinos coming from farther away than our solar system, so I'm not sensing this asteroid at all. And it's still too far away to be seen with either of the visions.

But then others have sensed it and there is no reason to doubt them.

I don't know.

I heard it said that when it hits, our planet will shatter to pieces, that's how big it's supposed to be. This must be an exaggeration though. I mean, the asteroid is so far away that even the best leptognosts can barely make it out. It must be all just speculation.

Wasting my time dwelling on this. Going back to my garden. I have another idea I need to try.

Entry 91

I did it! It glows!

Oh, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever created.

It's a common tidal grass but I've modified its outer cells: now they produce light in response to motion. I call it bioluminescence. When there's a current or wave, the blades of grass glow the most delicate green. Not all the time, only when the plant is disturbed by the movement of water.

Oh, it's such a beautiful sight. I can sit there for hours and watch it dim and light up again.

It's a very soft light, nothing disturbing, but it does attract some creatures. So I sit there and watch the tidal grass sway and glimmer, while little fish, squid, and isopods come and investigate.

Some of the ingesters try to nibble at the grass, but I don't stop them. My alteration

won't harm them and, though I always find it disgusting when one organism devours another, I know it's the way nature works. Those simpler life forms haven't evolved enough to be self-sufficient. They can't photosynthesize nutrients so they have to rely on others. I don't begrudge them. If they like my bioluminescent grass, I'll make some more.

I feel at one with nature knowing that together we have created such a sublime plant.

Entry 92

There's been more talk of the asteroid. Many claim to have sensed it so it's probably not a gimmick after all.

Apparently some of the best minds are following it, determining its velocity and trajectory, making calculations. It will be interesting to see what they come up with, I suppose.

Tau said something that made me think. Imagine that for some reason we weren't able to detect the asteroid, I don't know, maybe we didn't have the lepton sense, or maybe we couldn't do the calculations, and the asteroid struck us unawares. A terrible possibility, that. Makes one grateful.

I've been busy in the garden again. Now that I know the principle of bioluminescence, I've applied it to some seamoss and a deepwater fern. And they both glow! I have a little fern forest below a rock parapet and I made several of the plants luminescent — the glowing leaves among the dark shrubbery look stunning.

Tau was amazed when he saw it.

Entry 93

I don't know what to make of the news. It seems the ones studying the asteroid agree that it will, in fact, collide with our planet. And they say it won't be in some distant future, but soon. They think it'll happen in less than a year! It's hard to believe.

Apparently the asteroid is huge, they call it the Giant.

Entry 94

The whole thing with the asteroid feels so unreal that I don't even seem bothered by it. I guess I can't really believe it.

I've added bioluminescent coral to my collection of glowing plants. I think this might be the most beautiful so far.

Wasn't easy either. I had to be really careful inserting my barbels not to damage its delicate structure.

Entry 95

Everyone's still talking about the asteroid. It is getting a bit boring, to be honest, but on the other hand the news does seem troubling. They've been running more analyses as they gather more data and they say it's going to hit the northern hemisphere and pretty hard too.

They say it'll be an impact like nothing we've ever experienced.

The good news is that we might be able to survive on the southern hemisphere, but what kind of a good news is that?

I could restart my garden if I had to, I suppose.

But then I also heard speculations that the impact might mess up the whole planet, so I don't know.

All very unnerving.

Entry 96

Well, the Giant is real enough. I saw it for the first time. Tau pointed it out last night. It's still not visible through photometry, but polarimetrically I could just about make it out — electromagnetic waves of something that seemed like a distant star. But I don't remember ever seeing a star in that particular position before, so I guess it must be the asteroid.

No surprise everyone is in a state of panic. But I heard they're looking for some kind of solution, a way to stop the catastrophe and save us.

Personally I don't see any options. What can we do? Stop an asteroid in its tracks? It's rather presumptuous to think we can interfere with the universe on such a scale. For all our twelve senses and our quick minds, we're still just insignificant specks of matter. The reality out there is much greater.

Entry 97

I've asked around about what this solution is supposed to be and I'm a bit

disappointed.

It seems like everyone is excited about a spec-sim created a long time ago by some famous sim artist (I don't remember his name). So in this simulation he proposed a civilization of ingesters (a rather bold idea, ingesters forming a civilization!) who dominate their world. Instead of symbiosis, they simply use whatever they need. A horror scenario but I guess some like their sims to be shocking.

But what gets everyone excited is that apparently these imaginary creatures, these biped ingesters, are well equipped to deal with a crisis like the one we're facing.

And how is that supposed to help us?

Entry 98

I have to stop listening to all this talk, it's so upsetting.

They made some more predictions. They say the impact will be so tremendous that it'll knock off a huge piece of crust from the northern hemisphere. They say we could survive it in the south. But without the outer layer, the core of our planet will cool down, solidify, and stop producing the magnetic field.

I was imagining how it would be without the magnetic field and it's not a pretty picture. Forget that our magnetoception will become useless, I'm sure we can develop some other sense to swim at night. No, that's not the big problem at all.

What will happen is that without the magnetic field there will be nothing to stop the solar wind from blowing away our atmosphere. It will take a while before it's all gone, but

not that long, not that long at all.

And once the atmosphere is gone the water is going to escape into space! Just like that. And the whole planet will become cold and arid.

We can't live without water.

No, there's no chance we can survive that.

Funny, the things we take for granted. Who would have thought? The magnetic field.

I think I'd rather die in the initial blast than dry out or slowly bake in the sun.

Entry 99

I went to the surface and floated, watching the starry sky.

So many stars out there, so many worlds, and we know so little of them all.

When our planet dies it will be the end of the world as we know it, but it will not be the end of the world. By no means. The universe won't even notice our little catastrophe.

Entry 100

I was working in my garden today and it struck me what a terrible thing it will be when our planet dies — so many beautiful life forms, such diversity — all gone.

It seems like an inexplicable cosmic waste!

But then the universe does not work on those terms, does it. So it might just happen,

for no reason, to no end. Without the universe even noticing.

The garden keeps me occupied. Without it I think I might go insane. Some do.

I keep fiddling with the bioluminescence but I don't want to overdo it. I think this might be the last project of this sort, but I hope it will come out spectacular — giant glowing kelp.

Entry 101

I keep thinking it must be some mistake.

How can it be? Why?

Of course these are all the wrong questions, how, why.

I saw it clearly tonight.

The weather was very calm and I was floating again, stargazing, and there it was, clearly visible. Not a Giant yet, but I think a little bigger than when I saw it last time. Or maybe it was just an illusion. I might've been fooling myself knowing it's coming closer.

But I think not, I think it was a bit bigger. And it looked more red than the stars.

The kelp is proving more difficult than the tidal grass and seamoss. It's a much more complex organism, though. I guess I must've made a chemesthetic mistake reading its amino acid profiles. I'll try another reading tomorrow.

Entry 102

I had a horrible thought today: What if there is no life anywhere else in the universe? What if we're the only planet like this, this special? When we're gone, is the universe going to become dead and silent?

Funny, but this perspective terrifies me more than my own impending death.

If this is the case, we should do something to prevent it. I know we're not responsible for the fate of life in the entire universe, but on the other hand, if our planet is the only one that hosts life, and we're the only sentient species, doesn't this make us sort of responsible?

But what can we do?

What?

Entry 103

I don't understand things they're proposing anymore. It's all this old sim artist and his work.

Based on his simulation they say it's theoretically possible to gather the energy in our world and send it off to space to blast the asteroid before it gets to us. Apparently that's what the bipeds from the simulation do.

Crazy.

And this other talk, of us leaving. I've heard that some have started working on a structure that could take us into space. They want to gather whatever combustible materials they can find on our planet and they want to burn them as a means to propel themselves out.

Honestly, I don't know which idea is more ridiculous.

Tau came over yesterday telling me all that. I was working on the kelp — it still eludes me, but I can't seem to concentrate properly and I keep making mistakes with its amino acid strings.

Tau couldn't believe I'm still engaged with my gardening. Apparently everyone else is getting ready to leave. I laughed at that and he left offended. I guess I shouldn't have laughed. Everyone deals the way they can.

Entry 104

I keep thinking about life and all and I had an idea:

Right, so there's no chance of us surviving the Giant and what comes after. Not us. We're too fragile, too complicated, too specific for our own good. Like this kelp I keep tweaking. It's a complex organism and so many variables have to be just right for it to thrive.

The simpler organisms, on the other hand, have it easier.

So I thought, ok, we'll die, and my garden will die, but maybe not all life will die. Maybe the simplest forms could survive — the bacteria.

All life on our planet had evolved from them once. If they survive, maybe it could happen again.

Doesn't seem like such a stretch, does it?

Entry 105

This is our biggest test, as a species, and I'm afraid we're failing it. Otherwise rational

beings, we now seem overcome by madness.

They want us to travel into space! How, I'd like to know. By burning the planet we live on?

Just because some simulation, no matter how good, says it's possible for some bipeds to fly into space it doesn't mean it's possible for us. It's just a spec-sim!

We've spent millions of years evolving our symbiotic existence and now those hotheads want to cheat nature.

And even if it was possible, it's too late now!

And suppose we did manage to leave — where would we go? None of the planets in the solar system are habitable. And beyond? Who knows.

This space flier, it will never work.

Entry 106

I think I'm starting to feel it, the dread, the apprehension. Maybe even fear. It's less than a season to impact now.

Our time is running out.

My time is running out.

And I still have so many ideas, so many things I want to create. I will never get the chance to do them.

Entry 107

While everyone's been busy wasting time dreaming of flying, I've been making my own calculations. I wanted to make sure the bacteria will survive here. And good thing I checked because it turns out they won't!

Not even bacteria will be able to survive here after the magnetic disaster. I talked to a friend who's really good with astrogeology and those kind of things and he confirmed my findings.

This is a tragedy.

This is the real tragedy!

Entry 108

It terrifies me, the thought that all life will vanish. An empty universe.

There must be a way of at least getting them off the planet, the bacteria I mean. Maybe they can find another place to survive.

I was thinking, even though the neighboring planet, the third one from the sun, isn't habitable for us, the bacteria could probably survive there. It seems like all the vital chemical and physical conditions might be sufficient.

I should check...

Yes!

I analyzed the planet, scrutinized it with all senses (it's so close that even with my poor leptognition I got a decent feel of its neutrinos) and, after I did the calculations, it seems like they could! Our bacteria could survive there!

Oh, this is good news. There is some hope.

Entry 109

The Giant is coming. Now when you look at the sky it appears almost the size of the small moon. Clearly visible both day and night.

Some continue with their normal lives, others abandoned everything.

Me, I'm desperately looking for a way to save the bacteria. There must be a way of getting them out.

Not that structure they're working on, the combusting flier. That will never be ready in time.

There has to be another way. There has to.

Entry 110

All this hassle, all this frantic struggle, assembling, reassembling, digging, dragging. Ah, they're all trying to fight the universe as if they really thought they could win.

But the universe has its own ways.

I've realized I don't have to worry about a thing. Life will not be extinguished. Our doom will be their salvation. It's funny I didn't see it before.

When the Giant hits, shards of rocks from the northern hemisphere will be catapulted into space. Some of those rocks, and I've checked, some will definitely end up hitting other planets in our solar system eventually. And all the bacteria that live in the rocks will go with

them. Those that end up on the third planet from the sun will definitely be able to live there and evolve.

Into a new us? Who knows. But life will be saved and that is the important thing.

And such an elegant solution, too. The same asteroid that will destroy us will allow the bacteria to survive.

Entry 111

I swim in my garden, far away from the hub. Don't talk to anyone much anymore, they're all obsessed with the flier, but they don't seem to realize that it won't be ready in time.

I have found my peace.

I float around my garden and admire the life forms I helped to evolve. The glowing kelp is magnificent. You can see it from far away as it sways in the gentle waves, like a beacon of hope.

I'm glad I managed it. It's a sight I wouldn't want to have missed.

Entry 112

Tau came over. He doesn't visit much anymore. I showed him the kelp but he didn't appreciate it. His mind was elsewhere. Understandable, I guess.

He seemed anxious, desperate really. He kept saying the flier won't be ready in time, that all the experiments keep failing, and that he didn't want to die.

I tried to cheer him up by telling him about my discovery, that the bacteria will

survive, and be transported to other worlds in the rocks. And that got his attention. He suddenly became all excited, saying that maybe we should do the same, maybe that was a way for us too. I tried to explain how foolish that was but he just swam away in a rush of hope.

Fools' hope of course. If we stay in the northern hemisphere the impact will kill us. But even if we did survive it, if we managed to somehow haul up inside the rocks and be lucky to hit another planet, not burn while entering its atmosphere, not perish on impact — still, we'd die. There's no planet around that we could live on.

No, the bacteria are the only ones with a chance of survival.

Entry 113

Oh no, oh no, oh no

I made a mistake. I must've been blinded by hope and didn't think it all through.

Oh this is so terrible.

The bacteria won't survive the journey!

Even if the rock is enough to sustain them over the period of their journey they'll be killed in space by the solar radiation. The rocks can't shield them from that.

So they'll arrive dead to their new homes.

Dead.

Like us.

No life anywhere.

Just silence and emptiness.

Entry 114

This can't happen. I know I'll die, and it doesn't bother me much, but all life? That cannot happen.

Bacteria — they're still the best hope we've got.

I'll keep looking for a way.

Tau said I'm obsessed. Maybe. Doesn't matter.

There must be a way.

Entry 115

The big moon was up tonight. I could see the giant orb over the surface and its light infiltrating the water. Such a magnificent sight.

At the bottom the light was faint and blended with the glow of my luminescent plants.

I was wondering, will the big moon survive or will it get damaged in the blast, too? I hope it survives. Don't really know why. Not that it matters. Maybe just because it's so beautiful and I don't want all the beauty to be destroyed.

I guess I could determine the probability.

Well, if I'm not mistaken, it looks like the big moon will get damaged, too.

The Giant will bring doom for both the living and the inanimate.

But...

Oh, maybe there's a way. I need to think.

Entry 116

So I was thinking. The solar radiation will surely kill all living organisms. It will of course do no damage to a dead one, but a dead one will, well, be dead. So no use.

But what if I could make the bacteria appear dead?

The radiation breaks the working metabolism of a cell, but what if the cell stopped working for a while? It would be undamaged.

Not dead, but inanimate, dormant for the period of the travel.

Could I do it?

Maybe.

Entry 117

It's been quite a while...

They think I'm crazy but as the Giant grows bigger and bigger in our sky crazy becomes the norm.

It doesn't matter any more. I just do my thing. I keep modifying their strings, one by one. They still have time to multiply.

Entry 118

The Giant is enormous now. Every time I go up to the surface I see it, blood red in the sky. I think I can see it moving, getting closer, growing. But this might just be an illusion.

I rarely go up though, I keep moving and working.

Entry 119

I found a way to make them dormant. It wasn't really that difficult once it was clear what I wanted to achieve. And they're simple organisms, much simpler than anything I worked with in my garden, so reading them is straightforward.

I poke my barbels in the tiny channels they make in the rocks, and find them deep within, read their amino acid strings and modify them. It's a small alteration but complex in that I want to account for any contingency. But with my little modification any bacteria that finds itself in an environment too harmful to survive will pause all action — no division, no metabolism, nothing. But they won't die. They'll revive once the conditions change.

I travel as fast as I can, swim all over the northern hemisphere. I want to change as many bacteria as possible and in as many places as I can. That way I'll be sure at least some of my changelings make it.

Entry 120

No, I haven't done all the calculations, just the ones that make sure my modification will let the bacteria survive. I didn't do the environmental predictions, there's no time. And what's the point — there won't be an environment soon, anyway.

I chatted with someone as I traveled and he was horrified that I'd executed such a profound change in an organism. He said I was tampering with nature, not co-creating.

Of course he was right, but let's not lose perspective. It doesn't matter anymore. They just have to survive.

Entry 121

Ok, so my solution isn't ideal.

I might have made the bacteria too perfect. As simple as they are, they can live almost anywhere. And now, with my little modification, they'll also be able to survive anything.

Always.

I guess I made them eternal. And in the universe nothing is eternal. Well, nothing was, until now.

If there are other organisms out there, if any evolve, this might be a problem for them. My bacteria will always have the advantage.

Not a perfect solution, but the only one.

They've abandoned the flier project.

Entry 122

Have I made a terrible mistake?

Have I cursed future species with these indestructible bacteria?

I can't worry about that now. It's done. The bacteria will survive no matter what and I won't be there to see what will come out of it.

It's done.

I want to see my garden one last time before the end.

Entry 123

I did what I set out to do. Life will not be extinguished.

It should comfort me.

The end is so close now. So soon.

Now that I have nothing more to do I keep worrying about what will happen. Will it hurt? How long will it last?

And after the end? What will it be like to not be anymore?

It frightens me.

A hot flush of panic, something I've never experienced before. Fear of death, an odd primordial sensation.

Or is it the ultimate sensation of a sentient being?

Entry 124

My garden is the most beautiful place in the universe. Will such beauty ever exist again?

Entry 125

The Giant grows closer.

I'm scared.

Entry 126

The Giant is so big it makes me doubt if our planet will survive the hit at all. They said it will, they said only a part of the northern hemisphere will be annihilated, but it's hard to believe.

Will there be any trace of us left at all? Or will we vanish as if we never existed?

Will anyone ever come looking?

I hope you have enjoyed this short story.

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