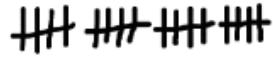


Commander Crippencraft, Heroic Pioneer and Lowly Insect, Reporting

When I woke up this morning, I was a fly in a jar.

Again, not again.

I scratch tally marks in the surface of my cylindrical crypt using scrap metal from my now defunct spacecraft. The tally marks indicate that I've been here for seven-hundred and five mornings:



...etcetera. Which would be almost two years back home on Earth, but Angregron takes eight hundred and thirty-one days to orbit its sun and the days are one hundred and thirty hours long, according to my watch.

Contrary to expectations, my captors don't take any special interest in me. They caught me buzzing around their solar system (all quite by accident!), adjudged me to be an inconsequential pest as I probed their atmosphere collecting data, and one of their ranks simply plucked my spacecraft up by the wing with its massive pincers.

The Angregronians are a highly-evolved and nonviolent race. They decided with minimal deliberation that I, the pest, or really my spacecraft (they couldn't have known that a certain self-reflective consciousness inhabited it!), wasn't to be crushed but should just be kept in a jar until it perished naturally under the crushing weight of Angregron's immense gravity, or the breathlessness of its hostile and sulfurous atmosphere.

Matt Saleh

At any rate, they wouldn't take positive action to prevent my death, but they also wouldn't be the ones to precipitate it.

What they likely didn't know was that my spacecraft was equipped with enough oxygen, food and water to last six human lifetimes. It is doubtful that this would have bothered them much. I gather that a human lifetime is quite diminutive compared with that of an Angregronian.

My measly fate was nevertheless regulated by a kind of Angregronian version of "due process." I didn't speak during my hearing, and if I had they surely would have thought it a mere series of instinctual peeps signifying nothing but undirected kinesis.

On Angregron, even the smallest life forms are entitled to certain basic rights. The earthly aphorism that "might makes right" is replaced by the Angregronian closely-held belief that "mites have rights."

Ha ha.

While I understood nothing of the brilliant deliberation that unfolded before me—spoken in some vast, lyrical and multitudinous tongue—I knew it was a legal proceeding because one party talked down to the other. And the down-talker had an unspoken and unspeakable air of authoritativeness that he was at, and indeed epitomized, the apex of all civilization, now and forever.

I felt very much like a mosquito with Clarence Darrow on retainer. My noble Angregronian defender slugged back and forth in the vast and infinite chambers of justice, with his pincers folded neatly behind his sludgy, invertebrate butt. From his great beak—and I apologize for using Earthly analogues (it certainly looked like no beak you have ever seen!)—rang out an impassioned and tuneful defense.

"Skrimp-op-grimp-op," he chirped. "Simper-fon-crimp-fop."

I gathered that this was a glorious and epic closing argument.

As he finished his oration, his beak bent to something like a self-satisfied grin, revealing large blue fangs that dripped acid.

*

And so I was found to be harmless, I suppose. Instead of going to the gallows (read: being stomped out as an afterthought), I was fortunate enough to be locked away in a vacuum-sealed jar for the remainder of my life.

My jar was placed on a shelf populated by trillions of other jars containing a profusion of organisms, carcasses, crypts and skeletons of the many other life forms that had happened into this: the wrong solar system and the cruelest of all realities (a true one).

I imagine that the organisms populating the jars beside me were once thought bold and heroic pioneers of the final frontier by their own kind, and had, like myself, achieved the highest station in life. It seems, however, that perspective is the great belittler, and we were to a member converted from the great heroes of home to the minor insects of Angregron, just like that.

What reduction in ego, a simple shift in the unit of analysis can bring!

I'll elaborate as best I can: for an Angregronian philosopher, I imagine that the essence which is deemed to constitute a "consciousness" is far greater-and-above the bar that we humans have set it at. So much so that I can't even describe *what* exactly constitutes consciousness on Angregron. I can only say that I don't have *it*.

Therefore, as many feebleminded human philosophers and scientists have done before me (it is indeed a great scientific tradition on Earth), I will rely on a simple analogy to explain something that is far over my head:

The universe is vast and complicated to a human being, but no more so than a television set is vast and complicated to a fly. An Angregronian sees the universe and knows all of its wirings, tubes, resistors, capacitors and knobs, and knows them very intimately. A human being sees only the screen, and flies into it wildly.

*

Mission command: should you ever find this report—which I highly doubt you will (unless another poor fool trips through the same wormhole that I did)—please know, first, that I have suffered an immense and soul-crushing loneliness, and numerous woes *beyond* mere loneliness, during my captivity on Angregron.

That said, I have also experienced the greatest enlightenment that a scientist can stumble upon: I have discovered that we are incomprehensibly small and that we understand next-to-nothing!

I am proud to report that it has been finally, irrefutably and horribly proven once and for all.

I wish only that during my lifetime I had functioned more within the confines of my newfound status as a tiny insect. What I am saying is, sometimes it's not so bad to be a bug. Bugs don't mind being bugs. Had I known I was a bug, I might not have minded being one myself. I likely would have spent far less time looking up at the sky and asking myself: “Where and wherefore is my place in all of *this*?”

Because I would have known that I was a bug. And now I have achieved a great scientific wisdom that eclipses all other lemmas and theorems which predated my discovery. That is, I dipped into an alien orbit and extended my ship's robotic arm to collect an atmospheric sample in a jar, only to find that I was the sample that belonged in a jar!

What I am saying, furthermore, is that I have a daughter. Her name is Samantha and the last I knew her she was a two year-old human occupant of Bella Villa, Missouri, U.S.A., Earth. If she is still alive when you find this report (which I admit is even more doubtful yet!), please send her the following transcript from daddy:

“Sam—stop living like a person and start living like a bug. Just go get the things you want and cling to them like there’s nothing else in all of senseless eternity. Instead of studying from books, study the way that a moth molests a lantern or a mosquito a flush, red rump. Do as they do, because here on Angregorion there are scientists, doctors, philosophers and lawyers doing things so unfathomably more brilliant than anything accomplished in human history that, essentially, all progress on Earth is a prim little ant hill and nothing at all more. Go get the light. Go suck the blood. Go serve the queen. If that is what you want. Love, Dad.”

And even as I finish the thought—wise as I now know the words to be—I am still stricken with a paroxysm of loneliness and regret here in the everythingness and nothingness of it all. Had I just known I was a bug, I would have spent every waking moment hugging little Sam and basking in the glow of her simple toothless wisdom and bright, bright eyes.

There. Having gotten that out.

*

I am not without my visitors. At somewhat regular intervals I am seen by a monstrous Angregorion toddler named Golphin-görp. Golphin-görp, whom I gather is sexless (although I will refer to “it” as a “he” for convenience’s sake), will enter the room full of jars and pace back and forth with his pincers folded neatly behind his posterior, much as my attorney did in those vast chambers of justice.

After some deliberation, he will choose a jar where the inhabitant is still alive, and he will mercilessly torment said inhabitant until his translucent, ten-chambered heart is filled with what can only be described as glee.

Just “yesterday” (in Angregronian time), I witnessed Golphin-görp place a giant magnifying glass over one of the jars, tip it to reflect the hot Angregronian sun, and cook a gray little humanoid alien right to death under the din of wild, desperate and universally-translatable pleas for mercy.

Sometime before that, I myself was the subject of the toddler’s malice. He stuck his pincers into my jar, picked me up by the back of my space suit, and simply plucked one of my arms off. Just like that (pluck).

He then dropped me back into the jar from what must have seemed to him a very small distance, but to me was a very great height. I broke both of my legs and sprained my lower back.

In my agony I watched him pick up another jar and pluck another small thing’s leg, then another’s tentacle, and still another’s wing. After each consecutive pluck, he did a thing which can best be called laughing, through gapped and deciduous fangs, with a countenance that can only be described as glee.

This somewhat jarring event occurred approximately eight Earth years ago, or five hundred and thirty-nine Angregronian days. Many similar events have happened since. I gather that adorable little Golphin-görp is the prized offspring and cute-little-button of the proprietor of the fine Angregronian mausoleum where we missionaries have been entombed in our jars.

If you find the handwriting in this report sloppy, please note that I have had to convert myself to a lefty.

*

The really demented thing is that I actually look forward to Golphin-görp's visits. I *like* being tormented by him, because it is at present my only alternative to soul-crushing boredom and loneliness. In an odd sense, Golphin-görp is all that I have, and I love him.

I think that the toddler feels a similar affinity, because while I have become a favorite target of his wicked games, he no longer harms me so badly that I might not be there the next morning.

Since taking my arm, he has popped out (and devoured) one of my eyes; he has spat acid into my jar and looked on joyously as I crawled atop my spaceship for safety; and he has tinkered with the notion of burning me alive under a magnifying glass.

However, his worst crime, by far, came when one morning he found a very much humanoid looking alien female amongst the vast array of jars, and placed her in my jar.

She was beautiful, with blue-green skin, elven ears, long raven hair and a lizard-like tail. Her name was Sim'op, and she communicated through telepathy. We understood each other gloriously well.

“Quite a mess we've found ourselves in!” she said to me telepathically.

“Agreed, and to think I once fancied myself intelligent,” I thought.

She smiled. “It feels very nice to communicate with someone.”

Every word she said pulsed through my neurons and receptors with magnificent energy. They weren't just words, but rather symbols that cut to the core of all meaning. Nothing was misinterpreted or poorly spoken because each message was imbued with the essence of true feeling.

I also hadn't discoursed with another living thing in five Earth years, or three hundred and thirty-seven Angregronian days. It had been even longer for Sim'op.

Matt Saleh

It is therefore unsurprising that she and I fell in love almost instantly.

It was a love of necessity and shortness of alternatives, to be sure, but I often find that those are the greatest loves of all. Opportunity breeds arrogance; I believe my pre-insect life is a testament to that fact.

Sim'op and I spent one hundred and thirty of the best hours of our respective lives together. Our respective lonelinesses melted away. Our respective souls merged.

The very next Angregorion morning, Golphin-görp came into the room and saw us lying together nude, atop my spacecraft. At this sight, a painful and petulant look of jealousy came over him, but was quickly replaced with the wide-brimming grin of a countenance that could only be described as glee.

Without hesitation, he stuck his pincer into our jar, pulled Sim'op away from my desperately grasping arm, and simply plucked her head off.

Just like that (pluck).

And I found myself alone and quite lonesome, again.

*

I've grown old before Golphin-görp's very eye.

I have been on Angregorion for nearly ten and a half Earth years, and they have been stressful—shall we say, “wrinkle-inducing”—years, at that. Golphin-görp has barely grown or developed during this period, and it has been less than a year in Angregorion time.

I am Golphin-görp's pet, and in recent times he has stopped tormenting me physically, due, I think, to my visibly weakened state. Most of his effort goes into decimating me psychologically, and I admit he is making great progress and is quite the innovator in this respect. Very sharp for his age.

Our newest game involves Golphin-görp linking me up to a kind of contraption, which suctions to my head and draws to a long conduit, ending in a bud that he puts in his aural canal, which lies directly below his chin.

Golphin-görp then flicks a switch and is delighted to be literally inside of my thoughts, and I gather that he fancies them a quite elementary and goofish game, because they register a very youthful elation in him as he picks up one symbol and puts it down somewhere else, crams a lunkish square into a round hole, and so on.

This is all exceedingly agonizing, as all my years of accrued consciousness are being scrambled up by a malicious toddler, placed out of order, breaking foundational links from one thought, image, or idea to the next, making the whole thing seem like a jumbled mess. I might add that it is also a further dent to my ego, that the most complicated webs of symbols that my brain has concocted over the years have all the intricacy of a simple geometric shape to baby Golphin-görp.

The very worst part of it all is that when Golphin-görp is in my thoughts, I am also in his. But whereas my thoughts are to him a simple, comprehensible playground of square pegs and round holes, his consciousness is a stupefying everythingness and nothingness that swallows me up and shows me entirely too much of the universe at once.

During these sessions of shared consciousness, I feel like I have been shoved into a black sack and all of the angels and demons in all of eternity are smashing pans around me in binary hits that tell the story of the universe, but with too much cacophony for simple old me to decipher.

The sessions last for as little or as much as Golphin-görp desires, and when they're done I have deep voids and lacunas in my old consciousness, and these are filled with the rattling insanity of plenary truths far too grand for my terrestrial self.

Still, though they decimate my psychological state, the sessions are not without their insights. In the place of the dense, confusing web of logic that once made up my consciousness, there is now a more evenly distinguishable dichotomy of obtuse blobs—blobs of unmistakable void and darkness (things that I don't know and are beyond what I ever can know), and blobs of great white light (things I have known but now know even more so, because they are backlit by now-verified eternal truths).

And the blobs of white light are the things of value that I can obtain, or at one point in my life could have, in all of their blessed simplicity.

*

For some time now I have feared that Golphin-görp would outgrow our little forays; that one Angregronian day he would simply cease to be a toddler, and would cross some great divide into adolescence, wherein little bugs with square pegs for thoughts no longer stirred his mighty interest.

Since my last entry, Golphin-görp has visited me once.

I have been here for seven hundred and six Angregronian mornings.

During his most recent visit, Golphin-görp looked into my jar for an inquisitive moment, reached in, and lifted my wrecked spacecraft out with his massive pincer—I think recognizing that it was the one thing keeping me alive. “He’s finally decided to kill me,” I thought. Taking the ship would serve as my last torment, for with it went my massive storages of food, water and oxygen. I was left with only the two tanks on my back and no food or drink at all.

Matt Saleh

This happened one hundred and thirty hours ago, or five and a half Earth days, or one Angregronian day. I am growing weak with starvation and thirst, and my one remaining oxygen tank is down to fifteen percent capacity. I believe that Golphin-görp will come this morning to watch me die, and I hope that he does. Nothing would please me more.

If this is indeed my last dispatch, let me say finally that it has been my great honor to serve my country and the human race. I hope that my discoveries will be of value to mankind, and that they will lead to a much-needed re-framing of our discourses, our pomposities and our infighting.

Send one last transcript to Samantha for me, should she still be living:

“Sam—daddy here, again. Greetings from Angregron! Where I am enjoying precious last sips of oxygen and will perish momentarily. How we take a simple thing like oxygen for granted, when we have it! Have you enjoyed your oxygen today? If not, take a step out into the yard, if you have a yard, and breathe it in deep through your mouth and your nose, and really think about how it feels going in, inhabiting your lungs, penetrating your blood. I love you, sweet thing, and will always remember you as a babbling child filled with wisdom and not yet tainted by the falsehoods of human self-importance. Run back to that state of being, my dear, if you have somehow drifted from it, and enjoy the surplus oxygen while you do! Love, Dad.”

These will be my last words, officially. They aren’t half-bad I think. I’m now down to six percent in my tank, all that folly of human nostalgia led to some unfortunate heavy breathing. I’m too weak and feeble to go on. Still no sign of Golphin-görp, bless his ten-chambered heart. And bless your heart too, mission command.

Cdr. Crippencraft, signing off with peace and love and inconsequentiality.

*

Update: there has been an epilogue!

How wrong I was about Golphin-görp, the little darling, apple of my eye. He did return that morning, a tad later than usual. But rather than watching gleefully as I perished by natural causes (which, I might add, would have suited me just fine), he instead stuck his pincer into my jar and revealed to me none other than a fully refurbished spacecraft!

Placing it tenderly in the jar, I saw his eye dart back and forth as he waited with great anticipation to see how I would react. I swear, mission command, I did see the bright flash of concern glimmer in his eye! From the cockpit he saw me wave my arm and smile, and he smiled right back with his gorgeous blue fangs. I was overcome with a thing that can only be described as joy, and I firmly believe that he was too.

To think, only “yesterday” I said that the toddler had not developed since I’d known him, and here he was expressing genuine empathy and goodwill towards another living thing. He opened the lid to my vacuum-sealed jar and I was free to go anywhere I wanted. The universe was spread out before me in all of its infiniteness.

And what did I do? Initially, something about a wormhole did pop into my mind, and about a daughter and a former life of the highest station. But just as it occurred to me that I would buzz off into those uncertainties, I remembered myself.

I turned my consciousness back around on itself and asked it:

“Commander, what is it that you love most in all of senseless eternity, at this very moment in time?”

And the answer was a no-contest.

“Why, Golphin-görp,” I replied to myself.

Matt Saleh

And mission command I will therefore amend my previous dispatch to say that this is my final correspondence from Angregron. If you speak to my daughter, tell her that I have found my light, and that I am happy as pie following my little darling Golphin-görp as he matures into adulthood.

I won't make the same mistake twice, I will watch him grow and grow, and I will buzz around him in circles, luxuriating in the haunt of his gleaming eye, the patter of his gap-fanged wisdom, and the brilliant patterns of his infinite mind.

Cdr. Crippencraft, signing off for good, snug as a bug in a rug.

*