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AWFULLY BIG AND FAR AWAY

I was reading in an article called "The Power of Progression" by Isaac Asimov that if the mass of all the known universe were converted into human beings -- which he says could happen at the present rate of progression in less than 7000 years -- this would mean a population of 54,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or 54 trillion trillion trillion trillion people. That sounds like a big crowd. Isn't it about the average attendance at worldcons these days? No doubt most of them would be registered Democrats too, but probably we would have a Republican president. In another article, "The Distance of Far," Asimov reports that at the time of writing (1970) the edge of the observable universe was calculated to be 12.5 billion light-years away. That sounds like a far piece.

But for big numbers, nothing else gives me the same sense of vastness that a term we used in childhood did. Remember? We would look up at, say, the North Star, and some kid would ask, "I wonder how far off that star is?" Somebody else would say, "Oh, about a thousand light-years." (We knew about light-years.) Another kid, not satisfied with such a modest estimate, would remark, "Heck, I'll bet it's 50 katrillion light-years from here!" Now, that term "katrillion" really made Polaris seem a long, long way off. For some reason it conjured up an immensity bigger and more distant than a mere 12.5 billion light-years. I wonder if kids use the term "katrillion" any more? I don't find it in any of the slang dictionaries I consulted, but when I was young it was kid talk signifying some quantity that was vast and unknown. I suppose the term must have been forgotten about six katrillion years ago.

THE LADY FROM BERKELEY

The pretty young woman came over to me and said, "I see you're from Berkeley too." I was standing near the registration desk of the Pacific coast convention of the American Historical association, fumblingly trying to make my name badge stick to my shirt. We were in Seattle and it was a hot August afternoon. "I don't attend the University any more," she added, "but I still live in Berkeley. Actually I wouldn't live anywhere else."

I agreed that it was a nice place to live. The woman went on, "Did you see the look on the girl's face when you registered? I mean, when you told her you were from Berkeley?"

I said, no I hadn't. The woman said, "Even in Europe, when you tell them you're from Berkeley, they know what that means!"

I started to ask, "What does it mean?" but decided that wasn't the thing to say. I supposed I knew what she meant. Instead I said, "How

do they pronounce 'Berkeley' in Europe? Do they know it's pronounced with the 'Berk' to rime with 'jerk'? Or do they pronounce it in the English way? I once received a fanzine from somebody in London that was missent first to the English town named Berkeley. It's spelled the same way, but obviously not pronounced in the way you and I think proper."

"Of course," she said absently, intent upon her own sequence of thought. I looked at her curiously. I don't have much knowledge of expensive stylish clothes, but hers were obviously not bought at Penney's. I figured that Gretchen and I could live a month, maybe two, on the money this woman had spent for the clothes on her back.

"My god it's hot," the woman said. "At least I notice they've provided us with some refreshments. What's this drink? Gatorade? Isn't that what football players drink? Is it always so hot in Seattle?"

I said I thought it sometimes snows in the winter.

"We get spoiled living in the Bay area," she said. "We forget there's a big world out here with intolerable climates, maniacal governments, monstrous corporations. dull people, and warped beliefs that ought to have died with Rutherford B. Hayes." She filled two plastic cups with the tepid liquid and handed one to me. She raised her cup. "Confusion to our enemies!" she said.

"To the revolution!" I said, and we drank. Even with her fancy clothes, I knew she would drink to that. After all, she was from Berkeley.

WAKING FROM SLEEP

After seeing (again) the Bogart-Bacall movie version of "The Big Sleep" (1946) I reread the novel by Raymond Chandler (1939). It had been a long while since I read it last, and I had forgotten many of the details. The story seems to be taking place in a world almost as remote from us as Sherlock Holmes' London. There's a lot of cigaret smoking going on (in the movie too), but nobody complains about being "allergic" to the smoke. In 1939 nobody had yet thought of this ploy. Phone calls cost a nickel. "Packard" is the last word in luxury cars. Philip Marlowe has stereotyped notions about homosexuals ("If you can weigh 190 pounds and look like a fairy, I was doing my best"; "A pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like") that seem ludicrous in 1984. One of the villains runs an under-the-counter porn shop. His contraband is characterized as "indescribable filth," so awful that a police captain blushes to glance through one of the books. Like most examples of pornography of an earlier era, it's probably about one-tenth as potent as

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stuff you can buy openly today at the corner drugstore or supermarket. But the thing that amused me most was that during a stake-out, Marlowe's car is "long overparked" (he is sitting in it, drinking whiskey, as a matter of fact), but the cops are too busy in the rain to "bother about that." In that wonderful era meter maids haven't been invented, and parking tickets are all written by cops on the beat. A lot happens, a lot changes, in 45 years.

THE PICKLE JAR SYNDROME

"You're just a damn sexist," Gretchen said to me. She said it on more than one occasion. I answered, "I may be just a surface thinker, but a sexist?" "It's the same damn thing," she snarled.

One of the occasions was the evening that I concocted a skit, or schtick, completely extemporaneously, on Why I Would Prefer to Spend the Night with a Woman Instead of a Jar of Pickles. You can imagine how hilarious it was (I wish I could remember how it went). I was sitting at my desk improvising this wonderful monolog and laughing to myself. Like everybody else I am my own best audience. Laughing to myself. I realized that Gretchen wasn't laughing. "You're just a damn sexist," she said. "How insulting to women can you be? You have to debate whether you would prefer a night with a woman to a night with a jar of pickles! As a woman I find that disgusting, degrading."

"You weren't listening very closely," I said. "After all, I did decide in favor of a night with a woman. I'm not overly fond of pickles. Anyway, the whole point of the skit is a pretext for praising women, not denigrating them. If anything, I am too extravagant in my admiration for the female sex -- if that's possible. After all," I pointed out, realizing she wasn't in the least placated, "I've spent a thousand and one nights with you, and never once pined for a tryst with a jar of pickles." But she wasn't listening. She went off somewhere, growling.

Another occasion was the time that we were marking our separate ballots in the Berkeley Co-op Board of Directors election. Gretchen was sitting with furrowed brow over the candidates' statements, making heavy work of figuring who to vote for. I took a ballpoint and whipped out my ballot in nothing flat. I stuck the ballot in the envelope and sealed it. She said in amazement, "How can you vote so quickly?"

"Simple," I said. "There are three openings on the Board and there are three women running, among the other candidates. I just voted for the three women."

"Why? Did you read their statements and find out what they stand for?"

"I voted for them because they are women," I said.

"What!" she said. "Do you do this often? Is this the way you usually choose your candidates? Just on the basis of their sex? That's just a way of saying they have no merits to consider. You vote for somebody just because she has a hole between her legs. You're the most heterosexual person in the Bay area, but you're a sexist nevertheless, because you're pigheadedly prejudiced in favor of women rather than

prejudiced in the other direction. Some leftist you are. You're just a damn sexist."

"My god, I had completely forgotten about woman's physical attributes," I said. "Actually I vote for women because they are smarter than most men, more devoted to duty, more concerned about humankind and its future, if any. You can trust a woman in office. If she takes on a job, she'll do it to the best of her ability. She's stronger, more capable, more conscientious...."

"Do you do this all the time? Vote for a woman just on the theory that she's the best candidate regardless of any other considerations?"

"Sure, as long as there's a woman running. School board, county supervisors, BART directors, the State Assembly...."

"What if Anita Bryant" (you can tell how long ago this was) "were running for president against Teddy Kennedy? You'd vote for Anita Bryant?"

"Yes, I would," I admitted honestly.

"Lordy lordy," she said, shaking her head sadly, "I hope there aren't too many others like you in the country or we will end up with Phyllis Schlafly as president of the United States."

"Well, there may be a few exceptions to the rule," I started to say, but she cut in: "You're just a damn sexist!"

MEMORIES FROM A CRUDSHEET

From time to time Dave Rike shows me some of his cartoons and sketches intended for future issues of his fanzine. The everlasting vivacity of fanac and of fan art is of tender concern to me, but I confess that such creations of the drawing pencil sometimes prickle me through with a little envy, a little sadness. For I myself once aspired, one on one against the contrariness of my nature, to be a cartoonist, perhaps even a painter in the manner of Sisley or Monet. Till my high school days I was chiefly known, if known at all, among my classmates as a cartoonist. In my junior year I could have become the staff artist of the school newspaper, but by then I had discerned (I tell this with a sigh) the paltriness of my talent in that direction. Perhaps the only artwork I ever had published appeared far-ago in Sky Hook: a series of cartoons, all featuring the same little figure, that decorated the "Twippledop" column. I herewith rescue one of them from a crudsheet I recently discovered. It was first published in Sky Hook #8, autumn 1949. Ars longa, and all that.



It is better to light a fuse than to curse the darkness.
