

THE GREAT ATTRACTOR

Jodie had just chosen her project for the High School Science Fair. It was, "My Space Odyssey—How Far Have I Traveled?"

Jodie wasn't her name, but for the last two, three years she'd been modeling herself after Jodie Foster, who played the role of the extraterrestrial intelligence scientist in the movie "Contact."

Now she said to her friend Maggie, "I've been thinking about it. Not that right to life doesn't suck." They were in Cones-'n'-Things after school. Maggie was the other half of the Dumb Blonde Duo.

Maggie grimaced. "Oh, really? Don't joke around on this. Let's not be fighting."

Maggie was Catholic, sort of. Her mother was. Her dad was an agnostic. When he'd had his accident, Maggie was scared about the fires of hell, woke up one night smelling his flesh. Of course, then she was 11 and Jodie hadn't yet met her. Jodie still had hope for her. There are no fires of hell, and there is no life after death. How do you get that across?

Opening her art portfolio, Jodie unfolded her new family tree. It was a realistic watercolor tree, not just the linear kind with horizontal and vertical connecting lines, but also with

photographs, going back over 100 years, superimposed above the names of half the people listed on the brown tree branches.

Last year Jodie and her original tree had won Honorable Mention, Tri-County Public High Schools.

OK, that was then, she was thinking. "Today," she said to Maggie, "I'm not joking. I'm actually reconsidering women's choice. Could it be I'm becoming a believer?"

"If so, about time."

"You see, I now agree that I'm alive when I'm a one-cell fertilized egg, which is what you preach, you and your mother and your priest."

"Ugh," Maggie said "Ever since Father Eddie I don't like to visualize conception."

"Yes, like I told you, he was inappropriate."

"Not the right word. He's creepy, but I'm the only one who thinks so. They all adore him. Anyway, so what's your problem?"

"Fertilized eggs." Jodie waved her hand back and forth across the tree. "Long before I was a fertilized egg, every one of my ancestors also began as a fertilized egg. When I figure out how far I've traveled, should I actually trace all those microscopic sperm and egg particles of me? How far did they travel before they became me?"

Maggie said, "Search me. It's your project. I'm just a Dumb Blonde."

Jodie pointed to her mother. "The egg part of me traveled to Chicago from Yonkers, New York, that's where Mom was born, and then this is my grandmother. It's her wedding day. Take a look."

"She's gorgeous."

"Too bad beauty doesn't run to my generation. I don't know how her fertilized egg—the one with my mother—got to Yonkers. You see, Maggie, do I count the eggs or do I count the ovaries? According to our biology text, my Mom's ovaries already had 400,000 eggs when she was born. One of them was me. I could have become a miscarriage or maybe the teeniest preemie ever."

"Don't you go and win first prize. I'll never see you again. You'll get the science scholarship to some school in the east."

Jodie grinned, "Don't worry. I'm shooting for the Nobel Prize."

Maggie said, "Well, maybe there's some kind of junior Nobel Don't forget. Whatever the Nobel gives you, I get half. Our Dumb Blonde vow includes the Nobel, doesn't it?"

She intertwined her little finger with Maggie's. "Half and half. That's us. But, see, I didn't even mention my dad's sperm

or his father's or all their ancestors'. Pretty soon there are all these little sperm particles of me traveling from Germany and France. They're everywhere in the world, literally. My Dad's father—that's the grandfather I never met—invaded Japan in World War II. All of a sudden I discover that I have these illegitimate Japanese relatives—half relatives, I suppose—only one of whom I've ever met. As you know, Ted's cool."

Maggie said, "Maybe I'll start going to confession again. I could try to visualize your grandfather and his geisha girl. Mom says I don't have to visualize my parents after all. She spoke with Father Eddie, says he was just clumsy, just trying to make a theological point about the sacred act and the facts of life. So then I tried to visualize your parents. That didn't work either. No offense, your father's sperm—no way, zero, I mean zero."

Jodie said, "Everybody's always conceiving. Otherwise where do we come from? Christ, Maggie, millions and billions of microscopic particles of me travel the world for centuries and then—zap—just 15 years ago they all converge into me. Hard as it is to visualize, all it takes is one moment of parental passion in each generation."

Maggie stood up. "There it is again—parental passion. Let's get out of here."

"Good idea."

Jodie closed her portfolio case and was eager to get home. She did at least 90% of her research on the internet, and now—thanks to her Dad—she was onto something brand new.

As she and Maggie paid the cashier, she was thinking, no matter what Maggie and Father Eddie believe, there was never any Garden of Eden, and there were never any Adam and Eve. She believed 100% in Charles Darwin. So the only problem, should she go back to the first human being who evolved, or should she go back to the first living ape, or whatever? And then where should she go?

Out on the street Jodie nudged Maggie. She said, "So you and Billy. Have you decided to do the so-called sacred act? Don't say I didn't warn you, it's a great big anticlimax."

"Yeah, you and your so-called third cousin. You weren't even you. You were Jodie Foster. I told the creep, "Jodie's a scientist." He said, "No, that wasn't science. It was a case of trial and error, with the emphasis on the error."

Jodie stopped and faced Maggie. "That was in Dumb Blonde confidence. You never told me you told anybody." When she saw Maggie struggling to say something, she squeezed Maggie's arm. "Don't worry. He's a priest, so I guess it's OK. I suppose he told you, You rule your hormones. Your hormones don't rule you."

"Correct. I'm morally obliged to rule my hormones until holy wedlock. Makes me wonder what he does with his hormones."

Jodie took out her bus pass. "Here comes my chariot. Gotta get back to the Great Attractor."

Maggie said, "Oooh, that's so smooth. I mean my new shampoo." All afternoon she'd been gathering her hair behind her head and stroking it. "I love that name. The Great Attractor sounds so totally theological."

Jodie said, "Theological, huh? Know what? I believe I'll call the creep."

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One way of looking at it, it was zero—or, more precisely, it was about 7 miles. "Algebra," she announced at dinner that night. "Algebra sucks, and I can prove it."

No one said anything. In Jodie's family that meant put up or shut up. Mom, the family mathematician, paused with her soup spoon in midair. She laid down the spoon and looked at Jodie from above her half eyeglasses.

Jodie had come prepared. Holding up a sheet of graph paper, she pointed to the origin where the x and y axes met in the center. "This red circle is where I was born, in some hospital on Harrison Street in Chicago. Or so I'm told. This blue circle is where I am right now. Hence this green line is all that's

left of what I've traveled, about 7 miles algebraically, from the hospital to here. If algebra is correct, what happened to Hawaii? How can I remember something that never happened? And Paris. What happened to Paris?"

Tommy had not yet progressed from arithmetic to algebra and was pretending to be bored. Dad patted his head. It was Dad, the family's amateur astronomer, who had suggested to Jodie that she consult the internet about the Great Attractor.

Dad said, "What she means is that when we traveled west to Hawaii, that was a negative distance on her graph. When we came home, we traveled east the same distance but this time a positive distance, and the two distances canceled each other out, algebraically."

Tommy said, "So that's what happened. What about going up in the air, like we did last year when we climbed the Duomo in Florence? We came down, so those two trips canceled each other out. She's right—algebra really sucks. I liked that Duomo. We were on the balcony and could look all the way down over the rail."

Jodie said, "Don't fret, Tommy. I've done a lot more traveling than 7 miles, and it's the kind of traveling that algebra can't possibly cancel out. That's because in space—I

mean not on the planet—I never ever come back to the same exact place.”

She wanted Tommy to understand. He was her personal focus group. Maggie had criticized her. “I’m just your average Dumb Blonde,” she’d said. “Why can’t you keep it simple for us ordinary folks?”

“Tommy,” she said, “the earth’s rotating on its axis—right? That means that every 24 hours, without moving a muscle, we make a complete circle and travel about 18,000 miles. If Chicago were on the equator, our circle would be 25,000 miles every day, each and every day.”

Tommy said, “Wow! Warp speed. What about revolving around the sun each and every year? Don’t you have to figure that, too?”

“A chip off the old block,” Dad said. “And the Earth is a planet in the solar system, and the solar system is in the Milky Way, which is rotating. She has to count everything.”

“Yes, I’m calculating the velocity of rotation at our position in the Milky Way. That’s so I can figure the distance we’re traveling every second of every day without even realizing it. And then—get this, Tommy, and thanks to you, Dad—there’s the Great Attractor. Tommy, there’s something superpowerful that’s pulling the whole Milky Way, and maybe everything else

there is, pulling us toward some place in the constellation Centaurus."

Tommy said, "Spooky."

Jodie reached over and rubbed his shoulder. "It is spooky. You don't even notice the pull, do you, Tommy? It moves us maybe 500 miles every single second. Some kind of tremendous force is propelling us, but we don't ever feel it."

"Sounds like God," Tommy said.

"I doubt it, but, yeah, I'm going to investigate whether it has theological significance."

Mom placed her eyeglasses on the table near her dessert plate. "And so, Jodie, for this radically new investigation, your methodology is what?"

"I have an appointment tonight to consult a priest."

Dad said, "A priest?"

"Yes. Maggie's priest."

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Father Eddie was skinny but nice looking, actually handsome, or he would be if he wore contacts. Jodie judged him to be about 30 or 35. He said, "How did you two get to be the Dumb Blonde Duo?"

He was wearing jeans and a gray sweater with elbow patches but not his collar. When she'd phoned him, he picked Gerties'

Old Fashioned Ice Cream. "You know it, don't you?" Whenever she and Maggie needed to have a serious discussion, they went to Gertie's because of the private booths.

"About a year and a half ago, we decided not to go punk but to do blonde instead. Certain kids—mostly the ones with navel rings and tattoos—they ostracized us."

"Still ostracized today?"

"Somewhat, but ostracism fades away. I'm more concerned about the persistent things, things you can't ignore."

The waitress brought her a monstrous chocolate ice cream soda with chocolate ice cream. He was just having coffee.

He stirred in some cream and said, "I looked up your Great Attractor on the internet. Very interesting. Why is it you think it has theological significance?"

"I don't. It's just another natural phenomenon."

He said, "I agree. So that's settled. Anything else? Is there anything persistent?"

For at least two full minutes neither of them spoke, and from years of counseling, back when she was 7 or 8 and supposedly a social misfit, she was familiar with the technique. He was trying to force her to speak, trying to wait her out.

Finally he said, "Look, it's already dark. I've taken a vow of poverty, so I don't have a car. If you're finished, I'll walk

you home. We just have to stop at the rectory to get my windbreaker."

She didn't answer but spooned the last of the ice cream.

He waved to the waitress and held up his coffee cup.

"I'm noticing," Jodie said, "that you didn't call for the check. If it's poverty, I'll treat. If you want to stay and talk, I can do that."

The waitress came and went. Stirring in the cream, he was about to take a sip but set down the cup, a drop or two sloshing onto the saucer. "Jodie, what exactly are you up to?"

"On account of the visualization exercise you gave her, Maggie thinks you're a sex fiend. That's not the exact term she uses. I'd like you to know I don't agree."

"All right. Thanks."

She gurgled the last of her soda through the straw. She said, "Please don't forget. I'm not one of your parishioners."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'm interested in something that's really cosmic and possibly theological, but I definitely don't want any thou shalt not."

"No problem."

She said, "Another thing. Your holy vows. When Maggie talks to you—or let's suppose I talk to you—is whatever we say a total priestly secret?"

"This isn't the confessional, but I keep secrets."

The waitress had brought the check. He picked it up and left a \$1.25 tip. "It's a beautiful night. Let's go get my windbreaker. We'll have a pleasant long walk."

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Next afternoon she and Maggie were back in Cones-`n`-Things. She said, "I did it. I met your creep. I like him a lot."

"So does it or doesn't it?"

"Does it or doesn't it what?"

Maggie said, "You know. Have theological significance."

"I think he's nice, definitely not a creep. The visualization exercise wasn't inappropriate. What you call the sacred act, he calls that the sacred union. And I agree it's a union. Here's why. Two separate things form something that never existed before. That's a union. Union is where water comes from, hydrogen and oxygen, so I don't see why it's sacred.

I told him that. He claims, to the contrary, all human love has theological significance. He simply wanted you to understand that human love creates something absolutely and totally unique.

He didn't want you to visualize anybody's sperm."

Maggie said, "So talking about me, were you? Well, that makes us even. Anyway, what's his take on the Great Attractor?"

"I described my project, and he was fascinated and had some reasonably good ideas. But they all come down to this: God is everywhere. He's not just in the constellation Centaurus."

"Exactly what I predicted he'd tell you."

Jodie said, "He surprised me. He believes in evolution. He suggested I arbitrarily assume that God created life on the planet four billion years ago. That gives me a terrific starting point. Since all fertilized eggs come from the first living beings who evolved, I don't have to trace the components. All I have to do is calculate the Earth's travels for four billion years. All the sperms and eggs are going along for the ride. I stayed up all night. I'm a good 25% done."

Maggie tapped Jodie's hand. "I knew you'd like him. What did he look like? Tell me everything he said about me. Truth is, it's because of my hormones that I don't go to confession any more. He's my Great Attractor. Weren't you attracted?"

"Mental hormones only."

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At 8:10 Jodie was waiting in a booth at Gertie's Old Fashioned Ice Cream. "One or two tonight?" the waitress said.

"He'll be here in a minute."

Actually she was afraid he wouldn't come—late practice for his high school's swim team. Then she spotted him heading right for her, skinny but with the broadest shoulders. "Hi," she said.

It was Theodore Matsumoto. He slid into the booth. "How's your project?"

"Last night I got some theological advice."

"Weird. Theological advice for a science project."

"Do you realize, Ted? My life, your life, originated four billion years ago. That's just an approximation, a convenience, of course, because that far back we can't date things with absolute certainty."

"From some guy, huh? So who was this guy?"

"A priest."

He said, "I can imagine the kind of advice."

"As a result of which," she said, "I made a decision. The priest says human decisions have religious significance, but he differentiates that from theological significance. I'm not quite sure what the difference is, but one's rational and emotional and the other's unfathomable. I'm pretty sure my decision is fathomable, whatever that means."

He groaned. "You summoned me for this theological bilge?"

"I summoned you because every human life has been in existence for four billion years."

"Approximately," he said. "Plus or minus a billion."

"If somebody dies, Ted, whether it's plus or minus doesn't matter. Billions of years of life come to a screeching end. I find that awesome. I don't know if it's human or divine, but it's totally awesome that every life somehow or other ends in death."

He got up, put down some dollars and said, "Look, I have to split. I've got homework. I'll see you Saturday."

She said, "The priest advised me to tell you something."

"OK."

"I'm pregnant." She couldn't help it, began crying, stopped quickly and wiped her eyes and nose with her napkin. "I decided to have an abortion. I'm real scared. It'll be day after tomorrow."

He stood there for a full minute, finally said, "Abortion," and then sank into the booth. After another minute he moved next to her and put his arm around her. He hugged her to him. He kissed her cheek.

She couldn't speak. He whispered, "You're right. This is awesome, totally awesome."