

THE LAUREL AND HARDY ALPHA CENTAURI FAREWELL TOUR

.....

They had been dead for two hundred years.

Yet they were alive.

They could not possibly be arriving here at Alpha C. Twelve, the twelfth planet out from Alpha Sun, yet they were arriving.

No mobs occurred. A congregation assembled quietly at dawn to consecrate this miracle, a genetic game birthed in a mortuary cathedral to ferment laughter on far worlds.

The night before, there had been a twenty-four-hour film riot by these two saints that ended with joyful tears. Then twenty thousand fans streamed across Alpha Skyport to watch their special craft burn the sky and ignite their hearts.

Now all fell silent.

There followed a technological eruption of shadow shows, laser graffiti, and Egyptian smokes and mirrors as the Alpha Lander gasped forth in a melange of dust and fire to form an incredible 1925

Model T Ford! An accordion car, and in its pleats two faces, one large, one small, two faces clutching their hats and waving wildly.

The Model T exploded and fell as the fat man and the thin leaped out to stare at the ruins. The fat man hurled his derby down and cried: "Well, here's another fine mess you got me into!" And then, "I can't take you anywhere!"

Then with storms of laughter they were run, half funeral, half coronation, into town.

"HI STAN, HELLO OLLIE," the TV news shouted.

"Since when are they alive?" said Will Grimes, my bartender.

"They aren't, they were, hell, it's complicated," I said, watching the hotel bar TV.

"They one of those late-twentieth-century medical tricks that help folks live ninety-nine years?"

"No."

"Virtual reality? Fiber optics plus wish fulfillment?"

"You're getting warm."

"DNA gene-splicing to rebirth pterodactyls unless the Supreme Court shoots the animals and downloads them back in time?"

"Well," I said. "It was . . ."

Just then, Laurel and Hardy ambled, or lurched, into the bar. Gasps all around. Ollie surveyed the scene.

"We," he announced, "desire a double demitasse of—"

"Gin," said Stanley.

"That," Ollie nodded, eyes shut.

"Are you for real?" Will Grimes said.

"We most certainly are." Hardy thumped his chest grandiloquently.

"Don't we look real?" Stan piped.

"Hell." Will Grimes poured drinks. "But how come you're black-and-white, like those old two-reelers? No color."

"Easy as pie," Stan beamed.

Ollie cut in.

"Tut, Stanley. Sir, when we were first created, we were full color, but folks said, no! That's not Stan and Ollie! So, back to the lab to be bleached out, and sent to fall off roofs . . ."

"In glorious black and white," Stan blinked.

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "Your skin! Pure light!"

"Computer cosmetics!"

"Still," I said, "how come you're here, two centuries after your . . . demise?"

"We never died!" Stan piped.

"Thank you, Stanley! We never lived, never died. We are first cousins to the lightbulb, telephone, the Penny Arcade, wireless telegraph, vacuum tube, TV transistor, the Salk vaccine intra-embryo split atom DNA explorer, the fax, e-mail, Internet! One vast Humpty Dumpty back on the lab wall! In sum, a

melee of mad scientists who did not reinvent dinosaurs but—”

“Two goofs chased by a Music Box downhill?” I said.

“*Touché.*”

“Two mad Christmas tree salesmen utterly destroying a house?”

“That!”

“And in nightgowns saw a gorilla in a tutu waltz by their beds?”

“That’s us!” piped Stan.

“But still, you’re alive?” I protested.

“Born out of necessity. Have you heard of the Loneliness, sir?”

“Long ago. It was cured.”

“We were the cure!” piped Laurel.

“Stanley! Another Bombay Ease, sir. To continue, there was this sickness called the Loneliness, that no one had predicted. In all the laboratory tests on the human body, figuring on the effects of zero gravity on the flow of blood, no one had questioned time, space, and distance. How would people survive far from Earth and all its root systems, its ambiances, for ten years or one hundred? Would space be hearth or asylum? Would it offer cosmic welcomes or booby hatches? No one knew.

“Well, there was a mass awakening one dark morning ninety years out from Earth. One young

man started to cry and couldn't stop. Why? Earth was distant. Earth was gone, vanished, hard to imagine!

"No one had planned that. What a blow to the psychological midriff.

"The sobbing and crying spread. Weeping is infectious. Like those old laugh records played after World War I. Folks listened and laughed!

"Sorrow, too, was epidemic. The Loneliness increased. Overnight, everyone attended funerals for lost dreams. Crying was it!

"Remedies were needed. Old movies, old videos, were medicine. But those were ghost séances. All the actors in those films died before the first rocket touched Pluto. Not images but real humans were needed!

"That," said Oliver Hardy, "is how we were born. Not reborn, no, but first-class, first time only, forget our original births and deaths. We would not be a Second Coming, but a First Arrival.

"We were rushed to completion, flesh on flesh, nerve ends to neurons, ganglia to ganglia, with DNA implants, chromosomes nabbed from a Glendale crypt, a Santa Monica tomb, an epidermal speck, the merest electric breath, then *voilà!*"

"Laurel and Hardy!" I cried.

"Right!" Hardy laughed. "With our first appearance on the Moon and a vaudeville turn at Mars

Stage One, the tears dried. The sobs died. People laughed!

"Not only did Stan and I cure morning and night sickness, but we made the Cal Tech Franksteins rich because civilization, laughing, decided to continue Outward Bound to ensure the immortality of mankind! Laurel? Hardy? Encore! Forgive my immodesty."

Will laid out fresh glasses.

"Gin all around," he said. "Let's get this straight! Are you alive?"

"No."

"Were you dead?"

"Nope," said Stan.

"We," announced Hardy, "are the Impossibles!"

"Hold on," I said. "Shake my hand. See? Not impossible."

"No," Hardy said demurely. "The Universe is impossible. We are just an extension of that Universe."

"Tell him, Ollie," Stan chirped.

"Thank you, Stanley." Ollie planted his plump fingers on his chest. "When people ask do you believe in Darwin? Yes! Lamarck? Yes! The Old Testament? Yes! But how can you believe in Darwin, Lamarck, and God saying let there be light, all three!?" Oliver Hardy surveyed three plump fingers. "Because . . . nothing is proven! Darwin, Lamarck, the Old Testament, not proven! So, why

not believe all three? Was the Universe created? Was there a Big Bang!? No. There was no Creation. The Universe, impossible, has always existed, billions of light-years, no start, no finish, in all directions, forever! Dear Lord, you cry. It had to commence sometime. No, I respond. It has been here forever. Impossible?! Yes. It surrounds us with its impossibility. So, pull up your socks. You are just as impossible as we are. We just seem a bit more strange because we exist in black and white!”

“I,” said Will, my barman, “am flabbergasted.”

“Flabbergast was the first Pope of Creation back ten billion billion billion nonexistent years. Hang that calendar on a wall where there is no wall.”

“And?” I said.

“And,” Oliver Hardy went on with haughty grandiosity, “the bottom line is Stan and I were never born, never died, yet here we are. What a grand resemblance, the Universe, Stanley and me!”

“That’s it!” piped Stan.

At this instant, the TV beeper on the far side of the pub gave an excruciating wail and flooded its screen with color.

“Disaster update,” a funeral voice said. “The Spoilers have arrived!”

“The Spoilers?” I said. “What do they spoil?”

“Us.” Ollie thumped his chest.

“Why would anyone want to spoil you?”

We all stared at the TV, where a quiet mob had gathered outside our hotel and now moved into the lobby and up to the mezzanine.

The throng entered the bar with neither an outcry nor a shriek. Their eyes blazed but they waited, hoping to find the cinematic infidels, the Biblical degenerates, Christ's flesh gone sour. They had many names for the enemy but only carried these on small cards passed out by hand.

There was an instant of panic. I feared that Stan and Ollie might be torn to celluloid shreds. But . . .

Laurel and Hardy vanished.

"What the hell—" I heard Will gasp.

"Yes, what?" I scanned the empty air as the mob streamed in one side of the bar and out the other, leaving ten dozen pamphlets:

DOWN WITH DIGITAL GHOSTS.
LET THE DEAD BURY THE DEAD.
DNA LAZARUS, BE GONE!
ONLY JESUS IS SECOND COMING.

I stared at the pamphlets as the crowd, muttering with frustration, ignored the empty air and went away.

Laurel and Hardy reappeared.

"How," said Oliver Hardy, "do you like them apples?"

"Where were you?"

"Here!" Stan peeped and yanked his topknot. His face, his body, vanished, returned, disappeared, came back.

"Digital venetian blinds?" I cried.

"Almost," Stan said.

"Stanley," said Hardy. "Dear sir, when young, did you own a plastic ruler in which were imbedded dinosaur images?"

"Yes!"

"And when you shifted the ruler?"

"The dinosaurs reared, fell back . . . disappeared. My God! Is that what you are, how you work?"

"An approximation," announced Hardy. "You might say we are printed out on an atmospheric lenticular louver. Seen full on, we are in full display. Seen from the side—*voilà!*" Hardy blinked off and on, on and off.

"I'll be damned," said Will.

"So we see you full on and the mob saw you sideways?"

"Yes! We have never arrived, never departed. Never born, we will never die. Now, as to those Spoilers. Why would they Spoil Stanley and me?"

"Why?"

"Because these Religious Avengers hate us because we claim the Universe is impossible." Ollie

stirred his finger in the gin. "They say the Creator lit the fuse on the Big Bang. But seeing a Universe a billion light-years long, Stan and I are blind, so—"

"They would Spoil us." Stan wrote his name on the air with his nose and crossed the T.

"And," Ollie went on grandly, "Gene Kelly, Garbo . . ."

"Gene Kelly!" Will cried. "Garbo? Ninotchka?!"

"Garbo laughs. She'll be along."

"Are there many . . ." I stopped, embarrassed.

"Are there other Laurel and Hardys out beyond? Yes and no."

"Both?"

"Why not? Other Stans and Ollies morphing down the cosmos? What harm would a dozen of us do?"

"But, but, but," said Will.

"No buts, sir." Ollie scanned his derby as if it were a crystal ball. "With so much melancholy to be cured on so many needy worlds, there could be a dozen Stans and Ollies. Good gravy, the Lonely sickness might rise again to knock millions into grief."

"I know—" said Will.

"You do not know, sir, so I'll continue. When questioned by skeptics we deny our DNA family. We are the only black-and-white ghosts who fall downstairs out of the Lazarus Internet."

"Like," piped Stan, "two peas in a pod!"

"Still, it is hard for me to believe—" I said.

"Do not believe, sir, know. Observe caterpillars and butterflies. Unrelated? Yet they are one. And what of Life itself, on Earth? How could dead rock, in primal sweats, hit by lightning, come alive? How could electric storms cause life to stir and know itself? Dunno, the scientists say. It just happened. Boy, some science! So, dear sirs, that's us. We happened. No beginning and no end. Half caterpillar, half moth."

"What's more . . ." whispered Stan, "Ollie and me, Ollie and I, will live forever."

"Forever?" I gasped.

"Isn't that what you always wanted, in the old days? When we did vaudeville in Dublin and London they shouted, 'Stan? Ollie? Don't die!'

"So," Stan finished, looking with moist eyes at the years ahead, "that's how it'll be. We'll come back for a last Farewell Tour. It's in our contract, year after year after year . . ." His voice was a falsetto whisper. ". . . forever."

"Forever," whispered someone.

"Or Eternity," said Ollie jauntily. "Whichever comes first."

"Where do you go next?" I said.

"There are planets in the Alpha complex, eight habitable, seven with colonial drops. Lots of Lonelies out there waiting for cheerleaders to show up and save a civilization. But there I go again."

"You," said Will quietly, "are Christs without the crucifixion. God's most dearly beloved intergalactic sons. Nazareth without tears."

"How you do go on," chirped Stan. "If we ever truly knew who we were, Ollie would be twice as pompous, me twice as dumb."

"I wouldn't say that!" cried Ollie.

"I just did," said Stan.

"Well," said Hardy, wiggling his fingers. "We must say ta-ta. The Centauri branch of the Irish orphans has a midnight feed. Stanley and I must head a Destruction Derby. Right, Stanley?"

"Do you never rest, never sleep?" I asked.

"With so much to do?"

"Ta-ta."

"Wait," I said.

I reached out to touch. Their handshakes, though black-and-white, were warm. "Toodle-oo," I said.

And they ambled, rolled with vaudeville jumps and leaps, out the door.

The rest of that night, suspended in laser beam Virtual Realities,

1. they met a gorilla on a flimsy bridge over a deep gorge.
2. their feet trapped in cement, they plunged into deep waters.
3. they heard a lunatic promise to twist their heads, tie their legs under their chins.

4. Laurel skipped over a picket fence. Hardy, jauntily trying the leap, knocked the fence down.

The grand finale was, of course, Oliver Hardy poised atop a staircase holding a huge birthday cake, fully lit, pompously certain of his dignity, taking just one misstep, not down, but hurled out. With a terrible cry of despair, birthday cake and Ollie in slow motion soared until cake, candles, and Ollie landed full on the dining-room table, Ollie's face smashed in frosting, as the table crashed and cake and Ollie hit the floor, and the chandelier and all the wall pictures leaped and fell in the same instant so that pictures, chandelier, table, cake, and Ollie were buried under lit candles! Then behold! The pictures leaped back onto walls, chandelier to ceiling, the cake reconstituted, and let Ollie go so that he was thrown in reverse up to the top of the stairs, the cake in his hands, glancing grandly over at us with a fake modest glance which said, here I go again, but this time no fall, no shriek! Watch!

And there he went again, in black and white, forever certain, forever slipping, forever dreading the upthrust target of flimsy table, gullible pictures, guillotine chandelier.

Pandemoniums of Alpha Centauri applause.

"But when, when, oh when will you return?" I asked.

"Whenever you feel the greatest need," said Ollie. "When the Affliction sets in, when the Loneliness stays. Now say the magic words. What the traffic cop said when we didn't move our wreck."

Stan and Ollie held on to their hats, waiting.

"Ollie," I said, "twiddle your tie."

Ollie twiddled his tie.

"Stan, pull your topknot."

Stan yanked his hair.

I took a deep breath and shouted:

"Git outta here, or I'll give you a ticket for blocking traffic!"

Leaping up, clapping their hats, elbows flying . . .

Laurel and Hardy got out of there.

The crying didn't stop till after the third Bombay gin.