



The Little Universe

a novel by Jason Matthews

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Sample 1 - Introduction and first chapters

Introduction

“We have society! Pinching myself. Yesterday they were primates. Grooming parasites, eating reeds. Today they’re driving! Just fifty thousand orbits? How could they evolve so quickly? I need to know. We looked for the link but nothing yet. Possible I missed something, but what? Jim’s going over the logs, maybe he’ll find it. Mind’s a blur—thoughts won’t stop—could go on all night. Need to rest, hope I can. Wish Rose could have seen this.”

- from p. 66 of Webster’s journal.

The Concept

It was late winter. My legs labored to turn the pedals on the bicycle as frigid air bit into my cheeks and knuckles. I cursed myself for leaving my hat and gloves at the bar the night before. I rode slowly, steering with one hand while warming the other in my pocket until frostbite forced a switch. It didn't matter how cold it was. I needed the work. My stomach reminded me that it needed food, real food. It was tired of stale crackers and cheap beer. I rode on through the frost.

I rode my bicycle everywhere. I even fashioned leather saddlebags over the front and rear tires to carry essential tools. I was the only carpenter I knew without a truck. Yet with two bags of basic tools, I could accomplish almost any job. From that, I felt some pride. I pedaled quickly past a busy construction site and endured the jeers from workers dressed in expensive coveralls, laughing at me as they leaned against new trucks, sipping their hot drinks. The aroma of fine coffee made my stomach grumble. I thought of my situation and felt a bit angry.

I wondered if I was a loser. Success meant having things like a good job, a wife and home, kids and pets. I was over thirty and had none of those. I didn't even own a car, but I took pride in limited needs and thought the world would be a better place if more people were like me, common and somewhat content. T-shirts and jeans filled the closet in my apartment, and I liked it that way.

Certainly I wasn't a success. Was I really a loser? It was a good question. The thought was going through my mind as I pulled up, hungry and half-frozen, to his driveway for my first meeting with Webster Adams.

Adams hired me as a handyman. He got my name from his neighbor, an elderly woman who had employed me in the past. He came out to meet me in the driveway, walking quickly in the brisk air, wearing a collar shirt and slacks. He was taller than average, thin and appeared to be late fifties with wavy black hair mixed with streaks of gray. He had very blue eyes.

Adams smiled awkwardly as he surveyed my bicycle. Then he stuck out his hand and shook mine.

"Your hand is freezing," he observed, gripping mine harder than I wanted, not sensing the pain of near frostbite I was experiencing.

I smiled and replied, "Pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Jon Gruber."

"Interesting transportation, Mr. Gruber. Especially in this weather."

His look was one of admiration and concern. I suspected he was deciding whether he had made a mistake in hiring me.

"Gets me from point A to B," I said, disconnecting the front leather bag. I slung it over my shoulder, hoping to instill some confidence in Adams.

He led me into his house. The entry had a cathedral ceiling with stained glass windows that filled the downstairs with an array of colors, like walking through a rainbow. The wooden floor was finely polished. My footsteps echoed softly as I followed him down the hallway.

"Should I take off my shoes?" I asked. Adams shook his head no.

Dozens of framed pictures hung on the walls of a happy family: man, wife and pretty daughter. The girl instantly caught my eye. Auburn hair, easy smile, the girl-next-door look that I was naturally attracted to.

Adams jogged up the first flight of stairs and I followed. This area was filled with astronomical works of art, paintings of planets, nebulas and constellations. Things I knew nothing about. Adams paused briefly on the second flight as he passed the largest of the paintings, a planet with a purple body and half-finished blue rings around it. It was a lovely piece of work though I wondered why it was unfinished. He stared at it for a moment then continued up.

The top floor was immaculate with marble counters, leather couches and a plush carpet leading to a stone hearth and fireplace where a small fire crackled. I looked around at the trophies of a successful man and wondered if I would ever have those things.

“I want to tear down this wall that separates the kitchen from the great room,” Adams explained. “The idea is to make it one big space.”

“I can do that.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah.”

“How would you get the materials here?”

“Delivery.”

“What would you recommend?” he asked.

I imagined the finished product and said, “I’ll rip out the wallboard and the studs to here, then frame a bar that stretches toward the middle. Then I’ll rewire the electrical, texture, paint and whatnot.”

He ended by saying, “I want it to be done well, Jon.”

I answered with a promise that never failed. “Sir, if you’re not delighted with the finished product, you don’t have to pay me.”

Adams laughed at my guarantee, but a look of ease came to his face. Then he pointed at the counter to a plate full of cookies. “Help yourself,” he said. “The neighbor brought them over.”

Once he looked away, I took three and stuffed them in my mouth. Fuel for good work, I thought.

I jogged downstairs and grabbed the remaining bag of tools from my bike. I anticipated the ride home without the heavy tools or the bitter morning cold. I reminded myself to stop by the Star Bar and pick up my hat and gloves. Samantha would hold them for me. Then I headed back upstairs and began demolishing the wall that enclosed his kitchen. Adams watched me briefly before going to his office.

After destroying the wall, I hauled the debris down to the garage. The place was full of circuits and devices, like a high-tech machine shop. I guessed that Adams was an inventor. He came down and saw me staring at things. He showed me an oscillating microscope and tried to explain how it worked. The concepts were mindboggling. I nodded along dumbly as if I

understood what he was saying. I didn't think Adams realized the information was beyond me as he went on and on with the explanation.

I worked for him for a week. He had a quiet but pleasant nature, introverted. He often seemed absorbed in thought as he came and left frequently during those days, preoccupied with his latest project. Sometimes he would jot notes in a little brown booklet. I heard him mumbling to himself as he read over the notes, complex fragments I could not begin to understand.

"That can't be? Portal from ct over zero at y parsec?" Adams said once in passing.

"Excuse me?" I asked with a paintbrush in hand.

"Sorry, Jon. Just thinking out loud."

"No problem. Let me know if I can help with anything," I said.

He grinned slightly, appreciating my joke.

We couldn't have been much more different. Adams was highly educated and used to wealth while I wasn't. At first we began with the usual chat about weather and sports. Eventually we talked about most anything, especially at lunch, which he preferred to be delivered. He never ate all of his and always offered the rest to me. We made an odd couple, but we had good talks and laughs and over time I sensed we were becoming friends.

As the job came to a close, I could tell he had something he wanted to ask, but never did I expect what he was about to say. I remember how clueless I felt when he first brought up the subject.

"Jon, have you ever wondered how the universe began?" Adams asked on the final day. He was holding a panel for the bar in place as I set the nails.

"What do you mean?" I asked, continuing to pound away.

"The origin of the stars and planets. Does that *stuff* interest you?"

"A little." I knew we were on a sphere going around the sun once a year and that space was really huge. Beyond that, what was there to think about?

"What do you know about The Big Bang?"

"You mean when the universe started?" I hit the nail but bent it sideways.

"Right," Adams said, staring at me. His directness made me slightly uncomfortable, but it was just his way, intense and passionate about his ideas.

"Why do you ask?"

Adams became excited as he spoke. "Imagine watching the universe begin. What if you could go back in time about twenty billion years and see it all happen? Do you have any idea what that would be like?"

"Not exactly."

"It all began with a piece of matter that was infinitely small and infinitely dense." Adams pressed his fingers in a tight spot to convey his message. "Then it exploded in brilliant light! Everything that exists came from that tiny piece of dense matter. Everything! Stars, planets, entire galaxies came from that pinpoint of matter."

“Sounds logical,” I said. It didn’t, of course. How could everything have started from one tiny spot?

I pounded the last nail and made sure the panel was secure.

“Jon, what would you say if I told you I’m attempting to reproduce The Big Bang? In miniature, of course.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m recreating The Big Bang. Simulating a universe.”

“For real?”

Simulate a universe? I knew Adams was an inventor but this seemed impossible.

“Would you like to see the project?”

“Maybe.”

“You can stay on the clock if it makes a difference.”

I put the hammer down and took off my tool-belt. We left the house and hopped into his truck, a new machine with only a few scuff marks in the bed. Adams drove as he explained the origin of the universe. I listened carefully, but the lecture was way over my head.

We passed the last of the buildings and houses in our town and continued into the countryside for a few minutes. I sat silently, wondering where this project would be and what it would be like. Adams let the silence extend. Finally, he turned onto a dirt path. We followed it until it ended and arrived at the only dwelling in sight.

“Here it is,” he announced.

The Project

It was an odd building way out in the middle of nothing but fields and forest. The structure looked newly built yet it was totally nondescript, unlike anything I had seen in my construction career. The building was three stories high and primarily elliptical, like an oval-shaped frame placed over a rectangular frame. Though it had no windows, it looked finished with a light brown plaster coating the whole thing. There was no paved driveway, just the dirt pad left from the construction vehicles.

Adams swiped a magnetic strip key and pressed buttons for a security code. The tall, heavy doors opened slowly, making a slight creaking sound. I breathed in the scent of new carpet. Large boxes placed on top of the rolls clogged up the entry.

We entered the cool room, leaving the doors open to let in light. The lobby appeared the same as the overall building. It was finished structurally, but it still needed texture, paint, carpeting and fixtures.

“There’s work to do here,” Adams said, as he showed me around the lobby. I nodded, thinking the entry alone could use many hours of my services.

Adams flicked a light switch then walked down a corridor to the center of the building. I followed slowly. My attention was drawn to large photos on the walls, dozens of images that must have been taken from a gigantic telescope. Star dust, planets, moons, entire galaxies. They were breathtaking pictures such as I had never seen and in far more detail than the paintings at Adams’ home. The matter exploded out from the frames in amazing color. My first impression was that the galaxies were not just rocks and matter, but living things.

“Are these artists’ paintings, or are they real?” I asked, tracing my finger around a stellar explosion. The label said it was a supernova.

“They’re all real. These are parts of our universe. Except for this one.” He pointed to a photo labeled a spiral galaxy. The stars were tiny points of bright light swirling in dark space. “This one’s a computer simulation of our galaxy.”

“Why a simulation?”

“We don’t have cameras far enough out in space to shoot it from this perspective.”

“Oh.” I felt stupid for asking and reminded myself to keep quiet on any subject I knew nothing about.

“That’s our sun,” he added, pointing to a secluded dot way out on a spiral arm of the galaxy.

“That’s our sun?” I asked, mesmerized by it.

“That’s it.”

“What about all these other lights?”

“They’re other suns. Some of them are stars you see on a clear night.”

Adams opened a door to the main room on the lower floor. We entered a command central with desks, chairs, computer equipment and dozens of large monitors. Some were attached to the walls, and some were still in boxes. Packing foam, shipping plastic and empty cartons littered the floor. On the desks, papers were scattered about. I looked at them and saw handwritten

equations. Chemistry or physics, I guessed. They were light years ahead of my understanding. I walked around the cool, dimly lit room, sensing something very unusual was going on.

“Have a seat,” Adams told me.

I sat in a swivel chair that was still in its shipping plastic. I found the chair comfortable and used my feet to spin around in circles.

“Jim, this is Jon Gruber,” Adams said. I looked around, still spinning. The room was empty except for Adams and me.

“Who are you talking to?” I asked, stopping my spins.

Adams didn’t respond. He continued speaking, it seemed, to the room in general. “Jon will be doing a lot of handyman work, but if you need help with simple things, you can ask him.”

“Am I missing something?” I asked.

Adams waited patiently through the silence.

Then a quiet voice asked, “What if I blow a circuit switch?” The voice spoke with honesty and calmness like that of a child, and it filled the room.

“That I’ll need to fix for now. In time, I’m sure Jon can handle things like that as well.”

“Cool. Are you talking with a computer?” I asked, standing up from the chair.

“Yes,” Adams said. “Jon, meet Jim. And he prefers not to be called a computer.”

“Sorry, Jim.” I looked around the room, wondering where to direct my voice. “Which way do I speak? Can you hear me okay?”

After a pause, Jim answered with a shy, “Yes.” I noticed a green light on the wall over the largest desk. It glowed more brightly as Jim spoke.

I asked, “Is that your light, Jim?” He didn’t answer, but the light pulsed gently.

Adams said, “It’s an indicator of how much Jim is thinking.”

It was my first conversation with a computer, and I felt a little awkward about what to say. Then Jim started asking me questions.

“Why are you here?” Jim began.

“I’m here to help.”

“With what?”

“I don’t know,” I answered, letting my words trail off, still trying to grasp what was going on. Jim’s light stayed green for a while.

I looked around and made a mental list of what needed doing. I was happy to be offered more work, but I was especially excited to be talking with a computer.

“What do you think?” Adams asked me.

“When can I start?”

“Today I took on an assistant. I wanted to do this alone, but that was just me being stubborn. Familiar, eh Rose? A young man with a strong back and good hands. Mr. Gruber will do fine. Jim’s taken a liking to him and vice versa.”

- from p. 12 of Webster’s journal.

(End of current sample)

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