

MIDNIGHT BURGER

Interlude: Science News

By
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LEIF
Hey, I picked up some news feeds at our last stop.

AVA
Only news about Paul Giamatti please.

LEIF
The Large Hadron Collider is a total bust apparently.

AVA
Ha. Dummies.

LEIF
They're nowhere on the hierarchy problem.

AVA
Still?

LEIF
The Higgs is still inexplicably light.

AVA
This is beautiful. They build a supercollider the size of a small town and it doesn't work so they build another supercollider the size of a bigger small town and it doesn't work so they build ANOTHER supercollider the size of the worlds biggest small town and guess what? What's the definition of insanity again?

LEIF
You're not bummed out by this?

AVA
Particle physics only exists for me to make fun of it.

LEIF
It says a lot of the particle people are jumping ship, moving to more provable fields.

AVA
Look at them. Picking up their lunch tray to move to a cooler table.

LEIF
This sucks, I was excited about these colliders.

AVA

Which one? The first one that didn't work or the second one that didn't work or the third one... that didn't work?

LEIF

I secretly had hopes for naturalism.

AVA

You would, you dirty hippie. I dance on the grave of reductionism.

LEIF

Why are you talking like these are failed experiments? They found this Higgs with these colliders.

AVA

Yes, and then what happened?

LEIF

Apparently it was all down hill from there.

AVA

I mean, scientists fail all the time but has there ever been such an epic airball like this? There are now three increasingly larger, miles long circles on the earth that cost billions of dollars, what are they going to do with them? Make the worlds biggest sumo circle?

LEIF

I don't know. You've gotta have a dream right?

AVA

This stuff hasn't matched up with the Planck scale since the 70s and they still said, "no no it's fine, we'll just make a big thing that smashes things together, that'll fix it."

LEIF

But I like big things that smash things together.

AVA

You and the rest of the standard model dum dums.

LEIF

Can we talk about how nothing matches the Planck scale? If the universe was injected with the appropriate level of Planckian energy, everything would explode.

AVA

That's why it's supersymmetry time, baby.

LEIF

I thought supersymetry was impossible.

AVA

It's improbable, sounds like the other ideas that failed after three giant supercolliders are the impossible ones. What else have you got for me?

LEIF

CalTech is back on their Planet X bullshit again.

AVA

What is this?

LEIF

They have a theory that there's a planet past Pluto.

AVA

Who cares?

LEIF

CalTech apparently. They have new mathematical evidence of a Neptune sized planet way past Pluto.

AVA

If there is we should blow it up just to be mean, can we blow up a planet yet?

LEIF

These little pet theories drive me crazy. You know they're only talking about this because it sounds cool to donors.

AVA

If they discover it they should sell the naming rights to the highest bidder. I want there to be a Planet Funions.

LEIF

Pringles Planet.

AVA

Would someone from Planet Funions be a Funionian?

LEIF

Funionite, I think.

AVA

What else?

LEIF

The Flatiron Institute has a theory about Immortal Stars.

AVA
What's that?

LEIF
They're saying that if a star balances perfectly at the edge of a black hole it can constantly feed on the accretion disc so it never runs out of fuel.

AVA
I'm perfectly balanced at the edge of Gloria's kitchen, never running out of fuel, am I an immortal star?

LEIF
Oh THIS is infuriating. NASA has suspended all spacewalks again.

AVA
Why? Did somebody get mugged?

LEIF
They're having a problem with water collecting in the helmets.

AVA
Water?

LEIF
Yes.

AVA
In the space suit?

LEIF
Yes.

AVA
In space?

LEIF
Yes.

AVA
You know Leif, I'm no engineer but I feel like water doesn't need to be in a space suit.

LEIF
You would be right.

AVA
What's causing it?

LEIF
This is where it get really fun. They don't know.

AVA
Water is, inexplicably, showing up in space suit helmets and NASA has no idea why.

LEIF
No idea.

AVA
How much water?

LEIF
A few years ago this one guy had his helmet fill up halfway before he got back to the ISS.

AVA
Halfway!

LEIF
Yes.

AVA
With water.

LEIF
With water.

AVA
In space.

LEIF
The guy almost drowned. In orbit.

AVA
Are they going to maybe look into this?

LEIF
I'm quoting directly: "Water leaks have been an intermittent issue for the suits for years. There are still continuing issues with evidence of water in the spacesuit helmets after the conclusion of an EVA or even, in some cases, during an EVA, with no clear root cause for the problem."

AVA
No clear root cause.

LEIF
That's right.

AVA
Summing up here: for years NASA astronauts have had their space helmets filling up with water and no one can explain why.

LEIF
Correct.

AVA
We're so dumb.

LEIF
We're idiots.

AVA
What else?

LEIF
Uhh, they now have a catalog of over five thousand exoplanets.

AVA
Gee, I wonder if any of them have intelligent life.

LEIF
Seriously this is like reading the local newspaper of your ass backwards hometown.

AVA
I love it. What else?

LEIF
The surface of Mercury is covered in diamonds.

AVA
Boring.

LEIF
HR 6819 is not a black hole, turns out.

AVA
What is it?

LEIF
It's interesting. It's a binary star system but the little star is dying because the bigger star is eating it, stripping it of all its fuel.

AVA
I was in a relationship like that. I was the big star.

LEIF
...Aw man...

AVA
What?

LEIF
This sucks.

AVA
What? Wait, let me guess. The Earth is flat.

LEIF
Voyager I.

AVA
There's a name I haven't heard in a while.

LEIF
The information they're getting back is all jumbled. They think it might be malfunctioning.

AVA
Of course it's malfunctioning, wasn't it launched during the Hoover administration?

LEIF
1977.

AVA
Well, Leif, c'mon.

LEIF
I know.

AVA
What? ...Aw, Leif, was this your favorite grandparent?

LEIF
Yeah, kinda.

AVA
They had a good run.

LEIF
You're right.

AVA
Honestly, I forgot it was still out there. That's impressive.

LEIF
I know. It was a real workhorse, y'know? It's like watching someone you love get senile.

AVA
What's the power source?

LEIF
Radioisotopes.

AVA
Well... 1977... it's going to run out of power in a couple of years anyway.

LEIF
Yeah, it is. I'd give anything to give it a tune up. Upgrade the power system. Give it a flame job.

AVA
Fuzzy dice.

LEIF
Yeah. Damn.

AVA
Leif, you seem heartbroken.

LEIF
I guess I am kind of. Voyager was the last cool thing NASA did.

AVA
It was pretty cool.

LEIF
I remember sitting there at Berkeley, watching the Space Shuttle put some frigging CNN satellite in orbit and just thinking "What are you guys doing? Where's my Mars base you assholes?" The International Space Station? Why?

AVA
Leif, nobody wants to live on Mars.

LEIF
I want to live on Mars.

AVA
We've been there three times. You didn't get off.

LEIF
I know.

AVA
It's like Nevada without Las Vegas.

LEIF
I know.

AVA
And 300 below zero.

LEIF

I know, I know.

AVA

Don't armchair quarterback NASA, they have to deal with Congressmen from Tennessee who think the world was made six thousand years ago.

LEIF

I know.

AVA

Have you ever watched a congressional hearing? It's like watching Hee-Haw.

LEIF

Complaining about NASA is every engineers God given right. I had this guy on one of my design teams once. He was from Luxembourg. He lived in America for most of his life but his favorite thing to do was to complain about Luxembourg. I guess that's me now.

AVA

You're really mad at Earth, aren't you?

LEIF

Look, do you have any idea how frustrating NASA is to an engineer? They're sitting on a mountain of cool designs that are never going to happen.

AVA

Maybe it's the Teds' fault.

LEIF

No, sadly, the NASA mess is all us. We sent two Voyager satellites into the unknown with gold records on them. Earth's greatest hits. Whale songs, kids, Blind Willie Johnson. That was supposed to be the opening act. "Here we come, cosmos." We were supposed to move out into the stars. Now look at us. Now it's just a bunch of billionaires launching themselves into low orbit saying "wheeeeeeeeeeeeeee"... it kind of sucks being stuck in our native timeline. I have to check back in on Earth and get depressed.

AVA

You didn't have to check back in.

LEIF

Yeah I guess I didn't.

AVA
When did you leave?

LEIF
Earth? '94.

AVA
Wow. You missed a few things.

LEIF
I kept in touch. That was a mistake.

AVA
Wait you found dark matter, a lifelong achievement, when you were in your twenties?

LEIF
I got my masters degree at 19. What do you want me to do? Get a phd in engineering? Who does that?

AVA
Leif you seem mad that you left Earth but also glad that you left Earth.

LEIF
It's me.

AVA
What is.

LEIF
It's me. Earth is me. I am Earth.

AVA
Wow, you really were raised by hippies.

LEIF
Tons of potential but decided to do this other thing instead. That's Earth, that's NASA, that's me.

AVA
Ah.

LEIF
Do you know what I mean?

AVA
Yes. Leif you have, what I like to call, a mean case of the "I was never featured on an episode of Nova blues."

LEIF
This isn't about my ego.

AVA

No, but it is about how you see yourself. Maybe you shouldn't be so hard on yourself and maybe we shouldn't be so hard on our home planet considering there's a fascist galactic empire out there putting their thumb on the scale.

LEIF

The problem is, sometimes I can't tell the difference. Sometimes I can't tell if it's Earth getting screwed or Earth screwing itself. And sometimes I can't tell if I'm getting screwed or I'm screwing myself. I discover dark matter on Earth, nobody ever knew. Carl Sagan made a gold record and sent it out into the great beyond trying to talk to the rest of the universe. Then, after that? Crickets. I am Earth.

AVA

Leif, do you honestly think Sagan was trying to reach alien races with this dying satellite of yours?

LEIF

What else was he trying to do?

AVA

He made a disc of solid gold and he put on it everything good about humanity. He said "this is us, not anything else, the good stuff, that's us." He made it official. He wasn't trying to talk to the stars, Leif. He was trying to talk to us. That's all he was ever trying to do.

LEIF

Fine, Carl Sagan was great. I'm not. What?

AVA

No I'm saying... where is it, hang on.

RUMMAGING THROUGH BOOKS AND PAPERS.

LEIF

Don't give me some quote that's going to change my life.

AVA

No, actually it's going to depress the shit out of you, hang on... Aha. Demon Haunted World by Carl Sagan. Published in 1995, the year after you left Earth.

PAGES FLIPPING.

AVA (CONT'D)

Here we go: Science is more than a body of knowledge; it is a way of thinking. I have a foreboding of an America in my children's or grandchildren's time—when the United States is a service and information economy; when nearly all the key manufacturing industries have slipped away to other countries; when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably question those in authority; when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness.

LEIF

Shit.

AVA

This is what he was fighting against. His whole life. Carl Sagan, baddest motherfucker in the joint, failed. Everything in this passage came true. And you're sitting there feeling sorry for yourself because you've done more and seen more than any engineer in the history of the world?... get it together, dude. You and I are more on the brink of constant discovery than anyone in the history of our world. The catch is, no one may ever know. And that's okay. I don't need people to know I'm right, Leif. I just need to be right. Long story short: be more like me. It's great over here in this booth.

LEIF

I'll consider it. Okay?

AVA

Good. What's some good news? I'm sure there was some.

LEIF

There is one.

AVA

Let's hear it.

LEIF

The James Webb Telescope.

AVA

Really?

LEIF
They finally got it in orbit. It's almost ready to go.

AVA
Is there a "but" in there?

LEIF
Honestly, not really. It's up, it's working, pretty soon now we'll be able to look deeper into the universe that we ever have. They're saying we might be able to even see planets light years away, even see what their atmospheres are made up of.

AVA
... We're going to photobomb the shit out of that thing.

LEIF
Absolutely.

THE END.