

The Empty Room

By David Vickery

Once there were four people, whose names were Lucy, Ensor, Armine and Xen, and they lived in a mansion in the country.

Once. 8×10^{10} years since the creation of the universe. *People.* Discrete epipersonalities summed from superstacked individuals. *Mansion.* Nonentropic construct sustained by energy field produced by epipersonalities. *Country.* Area of space from Milky Way galaxy to spiral galaxy M104, one light year x one light year x 60 million light years.

Ensor and Armine were the normal ones. Normal in function, normal even in a remote yet stylised form of relationship, as though their vastness had been subsumed into a one-to-one mesh so typical of an earlier time. But Lucy had formed with the mind of a child: a bright, inquisitive child, but a child nevertheless.

Zieglund, creator of the personality stacking technique and once hailed as the saviour of the universe, would have been dumbfounded had he known; would have rushed back to his galactically encompassing drawing board the next second. How had it occurred? Perhaps the abundance of creativity in her units, or her point of origin (races within what had been the Milky Way and Great Galaxy M31 in Andromeda). Perhaps even something of Zieglund's own sense of awe and wonder at the universe, never completely quashed, had entered her being. But it was far too late for Zieglund to rush anywhere. If he existed at all, if he could be said to have reality, it was as a numberless cell in Lucy's brain.

Lucy thought of Ensor and Armine as her parents. This was absurd, of course. Ensor might have been the head of the family once known as M33, but fathering creatures like him was quite beyond his ability. And Armine had only logic patterns in her breast.

Nevertheless, they lived as a little family group in all that vastness. Ensor and Armine were concerned about sustaining the construct while all around them slowly ticked down and guttered, without ever quite stopping. But all the while, energy dissipated and stars grew old, everywhere but in the bright haven Lucy called the mansion. Formed from what had been hundreds of galaxies, billions of stars and trillions of worlds. Kept going by the energy of almost unimaginable numbers of stacked lives.

Lucy had no time for such concerns; nor was she interested in the interminable discussions about the future that Ensor and Armine held. They had a responsibility, they told her: a bigger responsibility than any ever held before. And the mansion was the last desperate fling of sentient life to ward off the slow death of entropy. She could see they were worried, but she could also see with her childlike logic that worrying was useless. She just wanted to go and play.

Armine warned her to be careful. "Play anywhere you like, but don't let Xen get near you."

Xen was the other anomaly. However it had happened, Xen had evolved other priorities, taken on other responsibilities. He had decided that the best chance for the

stacked units he represented was to combine all the life energy into one megastack. Needless to say, that would be Xen himself.

Lucy had often sat, wide-eyed, listening to Armine tell how it all started. There had been five of them, although this happened before Lucy had evolved her self-awareness. Xen inveigled the fifth epipersonality, Corydon, into one of the rooms, merged the door with the wall and eventually forced Corydon into the corner. With Corydon trapped and unable to move, Xen tapped his energy and accessed his stacks. His individualities were transferred, leaving Corydon an empty shell. He collapsed in on himself and vanished forever.

Listening to this tale with Ensor close by on watch, Lucy was able to indulge in the delicious frisson of self-induced terror. But Xen didn't really frighten her. Providing she was careful, she would always be able to outrun him. Doubling his stacking capacity had slowed him down, they said. And Lucy was as light and as agile as any child.

Lucy was also bored. Ensor and Armine, even when taking a break from their lofty concerns, were too full of admonitions and restrictions for her liking. Above all, they were too grown-up. She spent some time watching the universe through the windows of the mansion's main room where Armine and Ensor usually stayed, but this was no fun. Ensor had told her that the stars and the galaxies were once as bright as jewels, but they were dull and dusty now. Only the mansion pulsed with sweet life.

So she started to explore the rooms: at first close to her parents, and later, as she grew more adventurous, further and further away. There was a lot to see. The mansion's main rationale was its very existence, of course: a bulwark against the collapse all around them. But it also housed the products and artifacts of myriad civilisations, in holoreproductions, data entry and even a few precious real objects.

Lucy liked best the rooms devoted to her own worlds of origin – not surprisingly, since her tastes were dictated by her brain stacks. Rambling through the suite of rooms devoted to the planet Earth was one of her favourite things. Of course, Earth itself had long since gone with its unremarkable sun. Even if it hadn't, the creation of the mansion would have wiped it out of existence in a single stroke. But for such a small and insignificant place it had created much that was beautiful, and its people had gone on to stock half of one of her constituent galaxies.

Sometimes, standing in front of a recall of an ancient painting or listening to some old music, Lucy would feel a shiver of delight. *Rembrandt*, the entry said, *self-portrait c.1657/8, Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum*. The words meant nothing to Lucy, even the word *Vienna*, once the heart and soul of a whole people, a bastion of romanticism against sordid decay just like the mansion. But the haunted, haunting eyes of the painter spoke volumes. *Bach*, the entry identified: *Mass in B minor, Kyrie*. For Lucy, an exquisite, soaring thrill, and sometimes, unnoticed by all, a tear where no tear should have been, where no lachrymal gland had ever been intended. Perhaps Zieglund himself, or the artist Karnetsund, or the composer Tiree, were themselves those thrills. Perhaps seeing and hearing through Lucy's eyes and ears, they lived vicariously in an unending moment of ecstasy.

Having no need to eat or sleep, the notion of time was irrelevant to Lucy. So it was impossible for her to say exactly when she first opened the door and entered the empty room. But she remembered the moment well as ushering in a new feeling of peace: a huge, boundless peace that she'd never known before.

Obviously it was a room that Ensor and Armine hadn't got around to filling with artifacts. Or perhaps there were just not enough artifacts, memorials and memories for all the vastness of the mansion. However it was, Lucy stepped out of the clutter of the last room into emptiness, whose dimensions were undefined, whose silence was silvery after the cacophony of films, music and holodramas.

After that moment, Lucy often found herself closing the door of the empty room behind her and luxuriating in its comforting void. Perhaps some of its comfort derived from the fact that there was nothing for Xen to hide behind and creep up on her unawares; so for the first time in her life she could let her guard down just a little.

It was on one of these occasions that she first thought something was lacking: that it would be perfect if only she had a companion. And, as though that thought were the father of action, she suddenly realised that she was not alone after all.

"Off to the planet Earth again today, Lucy?" asked Ensor in a rare moment of idleness one day.

"I haven't been there for days and days," Lucy replied.

"Oh? Perhaps it's just as well. There's a lot more to the Milky Way galaxy than that one long-dead planet. You know, we have a duty —"

And at that point Lucy suppressed a sigh. She knew what Ensor was going to say: that when any of them enjoyed a work of art or witnessed a period of a planet's history, that helped to keep those vital things alive. Almost everything seemed to be a duty to Ensor, and to Armine as well. So she burst out impetuously: "I'm not going to any of those rooms. I'm going to the empty room. I like it there."

Ensor was shocked. "An empty room! With all the riches of a hundred galaxies to choose from!"

Armine had entered from the south and caught the tail-end of the conversation.

"Isn't it boring, Lucy?"

Lucy shook her head. "Not now I've got Boo to play with."

"Boo?"

"He's my friend. He lives in the empty room and he plays with me." And she got up and left, obviously to renew her acquaintanceship.

Ensor was inclined to take a dubious view of the situation. "So now it's imaginary companions. I don't think she'll ever grow up – and we'll need her to help us in our work. All intelligent life is depending on us. On all of us."

Armine was relaxed. "Don't worry," she said. "It's just a phase. She'll get over it."

But trapped in the empty room, Boo was having a horribly real experience for an imaginary companion. Cornered and exhausted, Boo, alias Anatoly Bondarevski Ph.D., was crushed to death and then eradicated by a slaving Xen. Yet even in the moment of triumph after the chase, part of Xen's mind was unsettled by an unanswerable question: how had a living human being got inside the construct?

When Lucy reached the empty room she was skipping excitedly at the thought of seeing her friend again. Boo didn't lecture her all the time and go on and on about duty. Boo had ideas, just like Lucy herself. But as soon as she opened the door she saw that he was gone. The empty room really was empty, and Lucy didn't like it. She called his name a few

times with no effect. Then she started to stamp. And finally she was bawling in frustration. If only someone would come.

"Don't cry, Lucy."

She shook her head to fling away the tears, in a panic lest Xen had crept up on her unawares. But instead of the horrible grinning old man there were two of the little people, just like Boo. One of them was standing up and stretching, the other was sprawling on the ground. Lucy forgot to cry in a second, staring down at them through a watery film.

"Boo had to go away," said the man. "But don't worry. We're here now."

The sprawling figure got unsteadily to its feet and Lucy saw that it was a woman. "This place isn't safe for us yet," she said. "But we'll make it safe. You'll help us, won't you, Lucy?"

About two weeks later Lucy dropped in to the empty room as she did every day. It would always be the empty room to her, but the fact was that it hardly deserved that name any more. Buildings were scattered around near the door and fifty or sixty of the little people were hard at work on their machines. Lucy had helped make the buildings and the machines, and of course she'd thought all the people in the first place, but just this once she didn't take any pleasure in those facts. Her shoulders drooped as she closed the door.

"Hallo Ziggy," she said halfheartedly.

Ernst Zieglund looked up at her. "What's wrong, Lucy?" he said at once. That was typical of Ziggy, he was always so quick.

"It's Ensor. He says I'm spending too much time in here. He says I'm not to come here again. He says I'm neg - neglecting my studies."

Zieglund laughed. "You don't have to listen to Ensor any more," he said, and a great hope burgeoned inside Lucy. "His ideas are all wrong. He's trying to keep things fixed in the same way when they should be changing. I used to think the same way, but I was all wrong too. You've helped me realise that, Lucy. And now," he said with pride, "we're just about finished here."

"You mean – I can come and live with all of you here in the empty room?"

"Of course. You can live here with us, for ever and ever. And it won't be empty for much longer if everything works out. But there's something we'd like you to do for us first. Something very brave. Do you think you could?"

"I don't know," said Lucy after a pause, "but I'll try."

"That's my girl!" cried Zieglund. "Now, why don't you go and play for an hour or so while we finish up here?"

"Come on, Lucy," said Petra Tiree. "Let's go and make some more music."

The very brave something started badly and got quickly worse. First she had to try and find Xen; but of course, not knowing where he was made her jittery, jumping at every shadow. Then, when she opened the door to one of the M29 rooms, he was waiting just behind it. Perhaps he'd heard her moving about.

She screamed and jumped back just as he lunged, but then she was going the wrong way to get back. She didn't even know if there was a route back this way, or whether she'd end up in a dead end like Corydon all those years ago. But he was after her, moving fast, very fast; all that talk of his being slowed down didn't at all. And she didn't feel brave either, just terrified.

She tripped over the holotape theatre and panic thrilled through her. He dived forward; but he was just a little too eager. She twisted away and hauled herself to her feet again. She could hear him behind her, hear his eager breath and his horrible whispers of delight. Worse still, because of the way she was constructed, she could see him behind her even as she ran forwards. It took an effort of will to shut out his image. It was as though he was already possessing her, and those dripping teeth and worst of all those piercing, smiling eyes were tearing into her, becoming part of her just as she became part, but a far lesser part, of him.

We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep. She heard those lines in her head as she ran, her eyes filming with red. She had heard them often before, and loved them, but now their full horror struck her. That was all she would be, just a dream. And she wanted to live, she wanted to endure.

But she tried not to think of that. She didn't think of Xen at all, nor of Ensor or Armine, once so important, now so remote. She thought only of running, of her breath coming in stabbing spurts (even though she never became breathless); some long-gone athlete remembering pain? She thought of setting her feet down safe, please, let them be safe and not slip, because Xen was closing all the time. His sounds were growing louder, his eyes more threatening and his mouth wider in his special smile of welcome.

He reached out for her with a lunge, but at that moment she hurled herself through the invisible barrier and small hands established an unguessed-at equilibrium. She stood, panting, on the right side of the empty room. And on the wrong side, his great carapace heaving in perplexity and anger, was Xen.

Running into the force field had brought him up with a shock; but an even bigger shock had been all those people he could see running around behind Lucy. Something very wrong was going on here – and had been going on for some time, clearly. Nevertheless, it was nothing he couldn't deal with.

"Lucy, I'm sorry if I frightened you," he said, putting out sensor feelers into the field as he spoke. "It was just a game."

Lucy said nothing, just backed away a step or two.

"Destacking those personalities," he went on, starting to gently disrupt the field's integrity, "you must know that's wrong. Ask Ensor: he'll tell you. It's a waste of energy, Lucy. Energy is our lifeblood if we are to survive."

"Leave us alone," said Lucy. Xen increased his hold on the force field. He could feel it beginning to give. Then there was just a short open stretch and he'd be at them. The room was vast, but there was only one exit. And he'd already secured it behind him.

"Look, Lucy," he said. "Let's sit down like sensible people and talk about this. I'm sure we can come to an understanding."

Then the force field gave all at once like ripped gauze. Xen sprang forward and Lucy screamed and cowered away. At the edge of his vision, Xen saw one of the humans pull on a lever: and that was the last thing he knew. Irresistible gravitational force caught him in a killing crossfire, and he was pulled apart into sheer energy.

That energy was put to good use in the days and months ahead, creating hills, valleys, woods and streams and keeping Lucy integrated while she destacked more and more of her people. And as the room was added to, its true dimensions become more apparent. It

was far vaster than even Xen had thought. In fact, for all intents and purposes, it had no end.

And now there were not four people in the mansion, but over four million: enough playmates to keep even Lucy happy.