

# A Brief, Random Check-In with the Milky Way

by Alton R. Stone

A crow sits on a telephone pole overlooking a small store in a tiny hamlet in the Boston Mountains of western Arkansas. The last of a murder of crows on the pole, the others, all relatives, have just flown off to their tree crooks after feeding on a pile of day-old food left among a circle of rocks on the nearby riverbank. He will return to his crook soon but needs to be alone for a while. Somehow, somewhere, his tail feathers have come into contact with a sticky substance that has made maneuvering difficult. Not an old bird, are his flying days already coming to an end? He had attempted to wash himself in the river, but the unwelcome matter is not fauna or the usual trash or anything ordinary, but odorous, sticky, even blacker than himself, and now seemingly a part of his tail. He has prided himself on his shiny plumage, but this black goop is a major chink in his armor. Below, a two-leg sputters up to the store pump in his old truck. The crow knows this two-leg and his truck very well; there is never the one without the other. This is the dumpy one with the big nose, drooping eyes, ball cap, and overalls who blows blue muffler exhaust everywhere he goes. The crow knows all the two-legs in and around the town except shut-ins and infants. This two-leg's wife, who always wears a dress, is pleasant-looking and seems more friendly. As big-nose lumbers to the pump and places the beak-like instrument into the hole of his truck, he looks across the road toward the adjacent mountain and scratches his butt energetically, almost violently. The crow responds with a loud, single "Caw!" He cannot be sure, but it occurs to him that, somehow, the pump, big-nose, and his truck have something to do with his tail feather affliction, not that there is anything he can do about it. He and the others frequent the store lot and dumpster, and the smell of the pump is not dissimilar to that of the goop. He snaps at a mosquito then sets off for his nest in the crook of the tree in the woods where the others have already landed to settle for the evening.

A young blergic in a northern region of a planet orbiting Proxima Centauri is first trying to extend its liquipods into the lergic for bloqwat but instead, with repeated efforts, only succeeds in releasing her own bodily fluids. Her mlergic clacks her distenders and turns her body to check the plergic's reaction, but he has gone qwah. After the next failed attempt, the mlergic glubs to her mleen to stroke its grmmf with one distender as she rests upon the other six dozen or so. The blergic has closely observed her mler over the past many days lergicking so often with such easy precision that her determination seems boundless, even though she has only four not fully developed liquipods. The young blergic collapses with a low moan onto her mler and lies quietly upon her as the mler zstrwks her gently with her forefront distender until the blergic

eventually goes qwah. A mskwt is hovering around the plergic's grmmf, and with a small flick of a distender, he is now nqwah. As he glubs toward his little family, the mlergic sees that his distenders are already clacking. He zstrwks his mate with several of them, while she continues to zstrwk their mleen even more gently with her smallest front distender. Suddenly, with a small grunt, the blergic is nqwah and ready for food. The blergic watches carefully as her mlergic glubs to the lergic and, in less than a minute, has ex- tracted bloqwat with her liquipods, and she presents it to the excited blergic. But she is looking past her mler at the lergic, thinking over the minutiae of a process she had overlooked shortly before. The blergic glubs as quickly as she is able to the lergic, extends her tiny front liquipod into it, and pulls out a small portion of bloqwat, which she consumes enthusiastically. With one set of eyes on their blergic, the mlergic and pler- gic look at one another through the other five and almost in unison clack their distenders to- gether heartily, pleased with the persistence and precociousness of their little mleen.

A middle-aged man stands in the checkout line at a neighborhood chain retail store in a large eastern Arkansas town. The Rupert Holmes cover playing over the store speakers ends, and a Captain and Tennille one begins as the man in- spects with rapid eyes the brightly colored items, mostly candy, on the shelf positioned next to the counter. His arms are full, but he cannot resist the impulse to add a packet of gummy snacks to his load. An older man and woman are in line in front of him. She is buying two reduced-price Christmas decorations, and he is holding a skil- let. She hands three five-dollar bills to the cashier, who says, "You got a nickel?" The old woman replies, "Maybe" and opens her purse, removes her wallet, and digs through its zippered coin compartment. "I thought I had at least a few in here. Let me see." Meanwhile, the younger man wishes he had taken a shopping cart through the aisles, because he senses that the products—eight glass bottled drinks, a large container of dish- washing detergent, cotton balls for his wife, and the gummies—are positioned insecurely in his folded arms. "There," the woman says. "But no, that's an old quarter. Ha ha ha ha ha." She takes the coin back from the cashier, reopens her purse, and unzips her wallet coin compartment, where she replaces the quarter. Two of the younger man's bottled drinks are slipping, seem- ing to call for the floor. Were there even a foot of counter space, he could sit some of the pro- ducts down, but the old man stands a foot away, smiling and motionless as a statue, the skillet now hanging to his side. "Paw, do you have a nickel?" she says. He places the skillet on the counter, searches thoroughly through each front pants pocket, and says, "No, mother. I'm fresh out. Huh huh huh huh huh." Feeling a bottle more definitely beginning to slip, the younger man lowers his shoulder slightly and begins to thrust himself gently into the space between the counter and the old man, saying, "Excuse me, sir. May I sit a few of these things on the counter? I'm about to drop some stuff." Motionless, unre- sponsive, after a few seconds the old man twitches his head as if shooin' away a mosquito. He turns, cranes his face into the younger man's, and whispers something nonsensical: "It's a qua- drillion to one that a truly random check-in would have two from here!" A bottle, followed by all the rest, lunges for the shiny, white linoleum floor.



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Revision #1

Created 2026-08-19 13:33:03 UTC by Michael Moore

Updated 2026-08-19 13:38:29 UTC by Michael Moore