

Light

You are in the core of the sun. It's horrendously hot, much hotter than anything you can imagine. The blistering heat would absolutely boil any human away long before they reached this point, but you are something different. You feel none of the hellish heat that could burn planets away if they strayed too close, and none of the crushing weight of a mass equal to one thousand forty-eight Jupiter's, which in turn is the three hundred eighteen times the mass of the Earth. Gravity is harsh where you are, and this is not a place that life would ever come to fruition, where consciousness would never arise. No, the only thing that happens here is the age-old fusion of hydrogen into helium; the only thing strong enough to push back against that flattening strength of gravity. Part of that process creates you and your family, the photons. Alongside you is the blasted heat from before, joined to you intrinsically, like an internal twin. Funnily enough, your family are all identical to you, because they are you too.

You are excited. Born from the universe, and ready to travel through the cosmos at its predetermined speed limit. Unfortunately, as your family tells you, it will be a challenge to get away from here. There are stories of other "you"s that take over a million years to get out; physics and all that apparently. It's hard to move through the soupy, superheated plasma, and it takes all your energy one hundred percent of the time to even move a centimeter. Eventually, you move. How long until you're out of the center? Who knows. Moving is all you can concentrate on. The slow march forward continues through the dense plasma-mud and muck, and you keep bumping into other photons. None are offended, as this is the way things must happen. There is simply not enough room for all of you moving around, and the drunken steps and apologies to one another echo around and fill the solar chamber. You eventually progress to the point where

you see different types of photons being knocked and jostled, and eventually absorbed and released by your gamma ray carrying brethren. Eventually, you too are absorbed and reemitted, over, and over. Millions of times in the cycle, the broken washing machine of your existence results in the continued march getting slightly easier, and eventually, regular gases begin to exist within the plasma; their heat charged atoms lifting you to the top of their convection points. You thought you'd be cast into the last leg of your race to escape the birthing place, but no. You're stuck somewhat, and eventually dragged back down to the bottom of the zone by the gas bubbles that have lost their steam, just like water that has slightly cooled at the top of a boiling pot. You run through this cycle thousands of times. You lost count of the exact number.

The photons around you share stories about companions of theirs, saying how their friends' journeys have continued without them, long gone and long away. You started by yourself, but there were so many of you, and so many that you met, that loneliness never settled on your massless shoulders. There was no rush, since photons live for a quintillion years. Finally, you and the others escape from the tumbling prison, dislodging yourselves at the last second, and being flung towards your exit. It's still terribly hot, but not nearly as much as before. The last leg is easy enough, and you've broken through to your freedom.

You're thrown away from the birthing chamber and into the vacuum of space. It's empty blackness is a stark difference to the red place you've been in for the past million years. Your friends say goodbye as they cascade into all directions, going their own ways. Speeding away from the sun at the speed of light, it strikes you as odd how fast you can move. At these speeds, moving fast becomes everything else moving slowly. Icarian wings are stretched out into the deep, no worries of melting coming across your mind as you race across the void. The other

photons exist in all spectrums of light, and their energy levels give them away. The microwaves and infrareds are sluggish, compared to your visible bands. Your yellow color, however, pales in comparison to your hyperactive ultraviolet, x-ray, and gamma ray selves. You perceive your other selves that are not yourselves as they meet solid destinations, being absorbed into planets as radiation of all forms. Many of them land on the first small rock, brightening its small rocky and cratered front. Others still dashed past onto a different rock, covered by shimmering cloud cover made of sulfur that gave its atmosphere a mystifying haze. The clouds were nothing but a façade of beauty, being a mask for the life ending heat and molten, acidic air below on the ground. By the time you fling your vision back to the sun, it's become noticeably smaller, and the travel time was only six minutes. There are still many of you around, flying and prancing, unchained from density and gravity in any meaningful way.

There's a blue one coming up now, and it's been eight minutes since your freedom was earned. Its clouds don't cover the whole surface, but you also begin to see others coming from around the world, mostly everyone below the infrared. Fast, but nowhere as excited as you. You smile and wave, and they tell you about their origins. The conversation would be imperceptible to any observers, occurring as fast as they moved. They used to be like you, but they were absorbed into the blue waters and dark greens and deep browns of land, into trees as they assisted them in growing, onto animals skin as heat, and into the atmosphere and scattering to give it its distinctive blue hue. They spoke of an animal down there that used them to transfer information and pointed to a small craft in orbit above the small world while some others were going into a small satellite and being bounced around. They pointed down onto the side cast into darkness as rotation demands, and you saw others escaping into space from bright strands and points across

the lands. They told you of how the animal captured your others in flat shining panels for energy usage. Seeing your frown, they reiterate that your job is to provide these worlds with light and heat, and sometimes to smack them around a bit with mass ejections.

“Eventually,” they said, “They’ll have to move, since our world will destroy theirs during the Great Expansion.”

It would be sad if they were extinguished by that, so hopefully they were able to move before then. About one billion years before then, hopefully they’d do something eventually. Seeing as you’re a photon, morality isn’t all that important of a concept. The universe simply loses complexity without life, that’s all.

You couldn’t shake the thoughts of that species while you pushed through the empty vacuum out into no direction in particular. The only direction that mattered was forward anyway. But still, speeding through space so quickly, you hoped that the negative things the other protons had to say about that ape-species would be cleared up. Obliterating each other through so many means, even investigating how to do it with guns that fired lines of photons through the air and dropping inferior suns on one another. Interesting to say the least, but not very productive for universal complexity, or their own survival.

Pushing the thoughts to the back of your mind, you pressed on past the small dry red rock and its own fearful and anxious moons. Then there was the big red gas planet, its swirling dark storm and all its moons; one distinctively frozen and another throwing its molten complaints into space. There was the one with expansive and beautiful rings and green and purple auroras wrapping around the poles like hexagonal ribbons, with its moon that had uncovered lakes. And

then two blue ones, one of which is tilted and spins on its side, almost looking like a ball rolling in a circle. You journey past a tiny one, with a heart shape etched into the surface and an even smaller moon. You remember what the Earth-photons said before: that that species had names for all of these, they knew well of our existence as well, and the fact that photon duality was so confusing for them. It's only been five and half hours since getting here.

Further beyond the small icy-heart world, you see a small craft traveling within the heliopause with you. It's moving painfully slow, but its name is visible on the side: *Voyager One*. It's in tatters, probably from being hit with dust out here since it's too far for the sun to clean up this region with its gravity vacuum. The name implies a second, and you remember a different one that you saw slowly meandering at 0.00000054% of your own speed. That was the fastest artificial thing seen during the trip: New Horizons. Laughing to yourself like a madman in the cold abyss, you challenge the species to catch up with their own light, with their energy and vitality. The plea dissipates into nothing, and you speed away, in your forward direction, knowing they'll never catch up to you, but that they'll never stop trying.