Late, Late Show

Roger Zelazny

He realized, with a start, that he had been dozing.

For how long? He wondered.

The stars were in radically different positions...

Shrugging the dust within his variable-frequency cloak, he dismissed the problem. It didn’t really matter. There were so many other things more important than time...

He drifted aimlessly for a few eons, composing himself. Then he selected a direction and coasted away at several times lightspeed.

After a brief time, he was hailed by another of his own sort.

“Greetings.”

He slowed his flight, groped about, made contact.

“Greetings.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Where the action is.”

“What sort of action?”

“I’ll know when I get there.”

“In other words, you have no special plans?”

“Not really... Why?”

“Oh, I have an interesting little item which I might be persuaded to display for your amusement.”

“Oh? How interesting?”

“You like alien shows, don’t you?”

“Some of those foreign jobs are a little too arty for me.”

“This one is a stirring thing—real gripping and rousing, in fact—and I have it right here with me. See?”

“Yeah. What’s it about?”

“Now, that’s the whole bit. You don’t really know whether the thing’s a tragedy or a comedy, unless you watch it very carefully. It’s sort of subtle that way. Let’s go find an empty world and I’ll show you what I mean.”

“What’s this thing going to cost me?”

“A grat and three frittles.”

“One frittle.”

“Make it two.”

“Okay, I won’t haggle. I passed some fairly empty worlds awhile back—off this way.”

“Over there?”

“Yes. —So what’ve you got?”

“I’ve got a potential race on these tapes, that’s what, and they are high-speed swingers. This is a species I’d known for a long while—I can always pick ’em, you know me—and finally I decided I’d just have to book it for a few discriminating friends.”

“Are you trying to say it’s a—uh—racy race?”

“No, it’s not that sort of thing, really. Well, there are parts... But it’s the overall effect—the sweep, the panorama of the thing—”

“You don’t have to sell me on it, just stick to the facts. I said I’d buy a ticket.”

“I’ll give you a little background first off, then. There were so many of these creatures that they began sending out lots of colonists—first, all over their own world; later, all over their System. They were still overcrowded though, so they took to freezing their excess citizenry in elaborate cold-lockers. But they were still overcrowded. Then they discovered one of the simpler forms of matter transmission. The next refinement, of course, was matter recordation. Rather than shipping their citizens off to colonize bleak worlds or storing them in bulky cold-lockers, they reduced the excess population to electrical impulses and recorded it. It was cheaper than broadcasting them out to new frontiers, and they could play them back whenever they wanted.

“So, I decided to raid one of their Public Archives—that is to say, an archive in which part of their public was stored. No one even noticed that a few million were missing. Probably thought they just got misfiled. I hung onto the ones I’d taken then, and I watched the race itself awhile longer. It was a really good show—touching, colorful, memorable...

“So we’ll play back a million or so right now, on this world here—and watch them go through the whole bit over again. They will, I’m sure.”

“Well, how does the story go? What’s the plot?”

“I couldn’t tell you that without giving away the end. But there’s a lot of laughs in it, plenty of good battle scenes, some real uplifting moral elements, a few tender moments—and they’ll doubtless manufacture all kinds of interesting scenery.”

“It’s not one of those epics, is it?”

“No, it’s fairly short. —Uh, that’ll be a grat and three frittles.”

“Two frittles.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I suppose some might say, ‘It’s just a re-run of the human race,’ but I don’t feel that way about it. I think this thing might catch on big—very big. So, actually, you’re privileged to be one of the first—”

“Forget it.”

“Okay, two frittles. Make yourself comfortable.”

Notes

This light piece was listed as a poem in earlier bibliographies.