

FIFTH DAY
by Jack McDevitt

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“In another age, I was a customs officer on the northern border. During winter nights, when the temperature sank to forty below, and the blizzards came and the traffic stopped, it was Asimov’s that kept me alert. I retain my passion for the magazine to this day, and sympathize with those unfortunate souls who have never known what it means to catch the late freight to Polaris.”—Jack McDevitt

Jack McDevitt recently won the Southeastern Science Fiction Achievement (SESFA) Awards for best novel, *Seeker*, and lifetime achievement by a Southern writer. He is believed to be the only Philadelphia taxi driver ever to have claimed either award.

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Francis A. Gelper had been a biologist. He wasn’t especially well known outside Lockport. Won one or two minor awards, but nothing that raised any eyebrows. But everyone who knew him said he was brilliant. And they said it in a way that told me they meant it. They liked him, too. They all did. His colleagues shook their heads in disbelief that he was gone; several of his students openly cried when I tried to interview them. In his spare time, he was a Little League coach, and he even helped out down at the senior center. Wednesday evenings, he played competitive bridge.

He’d been on his way back to his apartment after a social gathering at the university—they’d been celebrating a prize given to one of the astrophysicists—when he apparently fell asleep at the wheel and drove his hybrid over an embankment. He was thirty-eight years old.

I’d never actually met him. I’d seen him from a distance on several occasions, and spotted him at the supermarket now and then. I’d always planned to do a feature story on him. *Biologist With a Heart*. Instead I got to do a postmortem appreciation.

He was from Twin Rivers, Alabama. I thought the body would be shipped back for the funeral, but they conducted the service locally, at the McComber Funeral Home on Park Street. The place was packed with friends and students. The crowd spilled out into the street.

The service was one of those attempts to celebrate his life rather than recognize his death. They never work, if you ask me. But there were a lot of people who wanted to say something about him. And the speakers all had trouble with their voices.

When it was over, I stood outside with Harvey Pointer, the biology department chairman, watching the crowd dissipate. Harvey and I had gone to

school together, been in Scouts together. He was a little guy with an outside mustache and the same mischievous smile that always made him the prime suspect when something happened. “Did he have a girlfriend?” I asked. “Any marital prospects?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think he was the marrying type.”

I let the comment go.

“You know, Ron,” he said, “Frank got caught up in the genesis problem and he devoted his life to it. He could have gotten a grant in any one of several research areas, but he wanted to settle that one issue. It was the driving force in his career.”

It was one of those hard, bright, sunny days when you have to stand facing away from the sun. “What’s the genesis problem?” I asked.

Harvey grinned. “How life got started. Where the first cell came from.”

“I thought that got settled years ago,” I said. “In a laboratory somewhere. Didn’t they mix some chemicals and add heat and water? Or was it electricity?”

“No.” Harvey stopped to talk to a couple of people from the department. Yeah, they were going to miss him. Damn shame. Then they were gone. “There’ve always been claims,” he said, continuing where he’d left off, “but nothing’s ever stood up.” He jammed his hands down into his topcoat pockets. “Pity. Solve that one and you get to take a Nobel home.”

Genesis. It would make a nice bit to add to the story I’d already half-written.

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As far as we could tell, none of Gelper’s family had shown up. His mother and father were still living, and he had a brother and sister. When I broached the subject to Harvey he said he didn’t know any details. Gelper hadn’t talked much about his family. “I don’t think he liked them much,” he added.

I’d seen odder things over the years, like Arnold Brown’s religious conversion at his mother’s funeral, and Morey Thomas’s insistence when they buried his father that it was no use because the old man wouldn’t stay dead. But usually death has a way of bringing families together. Especially when the loss is unexpected.

I wrote the story and went back to covering the routine social calendar for Lockport, doing weddings and visiting authors at the library and writing features on anybody who did anything out of the ordinary. If you discovered you could play a banjo standing on your head, you could make the front page of the *Register*.

So I’d forgotten about Gelper and his missing family when, about a month after the funeral, Harvey called me. “Got something you might be interested in,” he said.

“What is it, Harvey?”

“Can you come over?”

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You’d expect a department chairman to be set up in a reasonably elaborate office. In fact, he was worse off than I was. They had him jammed into a space about the size of a large closet. He sat behind a desk piled high with folders, magazines, disks, and legal pads. Behind him, a bulletin board had all but disappeared behind a legion of Post-its, schedules, and articles cut from magazines.

He got up when I appeared at the door, waved me in, shook my hand, and indicated a chair. “Good to see you, Ron,” he said, leaning back against his desk and folding his arms.

We did a couple of minutes of small talk before he came to the point. “You remember I told you what Frank was working on when he died?”

“Sure,” I said. “How life got started.”

“You knew he left his papers to the university?”

“No, I didn’t. In fact, I hadn’t thought of it at all.”

“I’ve been looking through them.”

“And—?”

He walked around behind the desk, took his seat, shifted back and forth a few times, and put his hands together. Announcement coming. “I could have called CNN. And the A.P., Ron. Instead I called *you*.”

“I appreciate that, Harvey.”

He had sharp brown eyes that could look through you. At the moment they had gone dull, as if he’d gone away somewhere. “Frank found the solution.”

“To what?”

“Genesis.” I stared at him. The eyes came back from wherever they’d been. “He worked out the process by which the first living cells appeared.”

The words just hung there. “Are you serious, Harvey?”

He nodded. “You think I’d make jokes about something like that? It’s true. At least, as far as we can tell. We haven’t run all the tests yet, but the numbers seem to be right.”

“Well, you’re an honest man, Harvey. You could have taken that for yourself. Claimed credit for a major discovery. Who would have known?”

“What makes you think I won’t?”

“How much cash is involved?”

He rubbed his index finger across his mustache. “Truth is, I thought about it, Ron. But I couldn’t have gotten away with it.”

“Why not?”

“I could never have done the equations. And everybody in the department knows it.” He chuckled. “No, this needed somebody brighter than I am.” He glanced out through the single window at Culbertson Hall, directly across from us. It was the home of the student center.

Bells went off in the building. I listened to doors opening, the sudden rush of voices in the corridors. “What a pity,” I said.

“How do you mean?”

“He makes a major discovery. And is killed before he can announce it. Is it really worth a Nobel?”

“Yes,” he said. “If everything bears out, as I suspect it will. But I think there’s a misunderstanding. This wasn’t a current set of results, Ron. It looks as if he’s had it locked up for more than seven years.”

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I asked whether he could explain it to me. In layman’s language, so I could pass it on to my readers. The short answer was *no*. But that didn’t stop him from trying. I got out my recorder and he started talking about primal conditions and triggers and carbon and God knows what else. “Could we duplicate it in a laboratory?” I asked.

“Already have.”

“Really? You’ve made *life*?”

“Well, we’ve done it virtually.”

“Okay.” What else would my readers want to know? “Why didn’t he announce the discovery?”

Harvey had no idea. “It makes no sense,” he said. “This was the grail.”

“What’s he been doing since?”

“Refining his results, looks like.”

“Stalling?”

“Maybe.” He took a deep breath. “Are you interested in knowing what the

odds were against life developing?"

"I've no idea. I've always assumed it was more or less inevitable."

"Not hardly. In fact, if Frank has it right, the possibility was one in trillions."

"That's a big number."

"Actually, it goes up another level. *Quadrillions*." He pushed back and the chair squeaked. "That first living thing requires a precise sequence of a long series of extraordinarily unlikely events. Then it has to survive to reproduce. We were the longest of long shots, Ron."

We stood looking at each other. "I guess it explains why those SETI guys never hear anything."

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Nobody who knew Gelper could offer any explanation why he might have withheld his breakthrough. When Harvey reported that the testing results continued to confirm everything, I wondered whether he might have been unaware of the implications. "No," said Harvey. "Not a chance."

So that was how I wrote a story that collected world-wide attention. It's true that hardly anybody in Lockport got excited, but I found myself filing for the A.P. and getting interviewed, along with Harvey, on the Science Channel.

Harvey was getting credit for the work, since he had made it public, and gradually Gelper disappeared into the background. I tracked down a few women who'd dated Gelper on and off, but none of them had suspected he'd been harboring a secret.

Eventually, I called his parents, got the father, and offered my sympathies. He thanked me, but his voice was distant. "*You're one of his friends?*" he asked.

"I'm a reporter for *The Lockport Register*," I said.

"*Oh.*"

"Your son did some very important work, Mr. Gelper. You must be proud of him."

"*I've read the stories.*"

"He did the breakthrough research years ago. But he never released the results."

"*So I understand.*"

"Did he tell you what he was doing?"

"*No.*"

“If you don’t mind my saying so, Mr. Gelper, that seems strange. I’d expect you would be the first person he’d confide in.”

“*Mr.—?*”

“Haight.”

“*Mr. Haight, my son and I have not been close. For a long time.*”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear it.” There was silence at the other end. “Can you imagine any reason why he’d have withheld this kind of information?”

“*I’m not surprised he did,*” he said. Then: “*Thanks for calling.*”

“Why?” I asked. “Why are you not surprised?”

“*Please let it go.*”

And I was listening to a dial tone.

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He wouldn’t agree to an interview. Wouldn’t return my calls. So I persuaded Harvey to draw up a departmental certificate of recognition to Francis Gelper. We framed it, and I bought a ticket to Huntsville, on my own dime, rented a car, and drove to Twin Rivers.

Gelper Senior was a retired real estate dealer. He’d been an automobile salesman at one time, had run unsuccessfully for the Twin Rivers school board, and had home-schooled his kids. He was semi-retired at the time of his son’s death. Showed up once a week at Gelper and Martin, which specialized in developing new properties.

His wife had, for a few years, been a math instructor at the local high school. They lived just outside town in a two-story brick home with columns and maybe a quarter-acre. A gardener was digging at some azalea bushes when I pulled into the driveway.

Mrs. Gelper answered the door. I’d seen no recent photos of her, but she was easy to recognize. She was well into her sixties, with blonde hair pulled back, blue eyes, and the sort of disconnected gaze that let me know I was of minor significance. “Yes?” she said, glancing down at the envelope in which I carried Frank’s award.

I introduced myself and explained that I’d come from Lockport University. In Maryland. She made no move to invite me inside.

“They’ve issued your son a certificate of appreciation,” I continued.

“Oh,” she said. “That’s very kind of them.” We stood there looking at each other.

A voice in back somewhere broke in: "Who's at the door, Margaret?"

She stepped aside and I saw Gelper Senior, *Charlie* Gelper, who had apparently been asleep on the sofa. "Please come in," she said. Then, to her husband: "He's brought something. For Frank."

I couldn't say the guy was hostile. But he clearly wanted me out of there. Apparently misunderstanding, he said that Frank was dead.

"It's an award," I said. "In recognition of his service."

He got up from the couch and watched while I removed the certificate from a padded manila envelope and held it out for whichever of them might choose to take it. Margaret did. She looked at it and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

Gelper nodded. "Tell them we appreciate it." I could see the son in the father. Same features, same wide shoulders, same eyes. He waited his turn, took the certificate from her, frowned at it, and said thanks again. The presentation was over.

"I don't know whether you're aware," I said, "but he's made a significant contribution to his field."

"So we've heard," said Margaret.

"They're mystified at the school." I tried to be casual. And of course when you try hard to be casual you know what happens.

She exchanged smiles with her husband. "Can I get you something? Coffee, maybe?"

"Yes, please." I was grateful she'd loosened up a bit.

Gelper laid the certificate on a side table. We were standing in the living room. They didn't lack for money. Leather furniture. Large double windows looking out on the grounds. Etched glassware. Finely carved bookshelves.

A copy of *The Hunting Digest* lay on a chair, and half a dozen books were arranged on one of the shelves. The others were devoted to artificial flowers, reproductions of classic art works, and framed photos.

"You from Lockport?" Gelper asked.

"Yes, sir. Lived there all my life."

I steered the conversation onto hunting, admitted I knew nothing about it, pretended it was something I'd always wanted to do. The coffee came. Margaret asked how well I'd known their son.

"Only in passing," I said. "But everybody he worked with, and his students, all thought very highly of him."

Eventually I was able to get back to Frank's failure to report what he'd found. "It baffles everybody. Harvey, his department head, says if he'd revealed what he knew, he'd have won the Nobel."

Margaret nodded. "I can tell you why he said nothing." Her voice shook.

"Why?" I asked.

"The newspapers say the process is so convoluted, that it requires such a conjunction of unlikely events, that the odds against it are almost infinite."

"And—?" I said.

"Scientists,"—she said it as if she were referring to a disreputable pack—were expecting that it would be routine. You get water, and sunlight, and a few basic elements, and next thing you know you have squirrels."

"It didn't work out that way," I said, trying to encourage her.

She nodded. "No. Despite all the talk, it took the hand of God. That's what Frank proved, what he wanted to deny. It's the fifth day." Tears were beginning to run down her cheeks.

Gelper came up behind her, held her shoulders, and looked down at me. He was an imposing figure. "He couldn't have stood that kind of result," he said in a soft voice. "He abandoned his faith a long time ago. I don't know whether you understand what that means. But it's why he kept it quiet. He lived in denial. Denied everything we know to be true." He looked shaken. "He was denying the Lord right to the end. Think about it. At this moment, our son is in hell."

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Well, I didn't know how to respond to that so I said thanks for your time and left. As soon as I was clear of the neighborhood, I called Harvey. "I don't think his folks approved of him."

"You figure out why?"

"It's a religious thing, apparently. They said something about a fifth day."

"It figures. They would have been referring to Genesis, I guess. The fifth day was when God created the first living things."

"It was a sad scene back there, Harvey. I thought religion was supposed to be a comfort."

"Not always. I guess his being gay didn't help, either."

"You didn't say he was gay."

"I couldn't see any reason to spread it around, Ron. I slipped just now, and

I'd appreciate it if you didn't print it."

"I won't. But I've interviewed some women who said they had dated him."

"I guess you could say he played both sides of the aisle."

I thought about Gelper standing there trembling and it occurred to me that *he* was the one in hell.

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I rode down to the local library, commandeered a computer, and did a search on Francis Gelper. I'd done that before, of course, when I'd been putting the original story together. Thousands of entries had popped up. Gelper on telomeres for *Nature*. Gelper discusses evolutionary extracts for *The Darwin Newsletter*. Gelper on cell cycle checkpoints for *Scientific American*.

But this time I narrowed the search. I added "gay."

The usual range of off-the-subject results showed up. Joe Gelper plays Gaylord Batterly in *Over the Top*, with George Francis conducting. Time travel novel *Back to the Gay Nineties* by Marie Gelper, one of the year's best, according to Mark Francis. Then I saw the one that froze me. It was from something called *The Revelation Bulletin*:

Exorcism Rites Performed on Three Boys

Twin Rivers, Ala. April 11. Three teenaged boys received exorcism rites this past Sunday at the Divine Beneficence Church. The ceremony was conducted by the Rev. Harry Parver, while hundreds of worshippers watched in awe.

The article went on to name the teens. One of them was Francis Gelper. I checked the date. He would have been fifteen.

I looked up the Divine Beneficence Church, and drove over. It was a picturesque place, not as big as it sounded in the story. It was freshly painted, with a white picket fence sealing off the grounds, and a large signboard exhorting everyone to attend the Mighty Soldiers of the Lord Revival that weekend. The Rev. Parver was listed as rector.

Ten minutes later I was back at the Gelper place.

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They were surprised to see me. "Tell me about the exorcism," I said.

Margaret went pale; Gelper took to glaring at me. "I don't see how it's any of your business," he said.

"What did he have to do? Stand at the front of the church while all his friends watched? And somebody prayed over him?"

Margaret looked through me. “We had no choice. We were fighting for his soul.”

“Did he have to confess his sins to the entire congregation?”

Gelper started for me. “Get out,” he said.

“That explains why he kept it quiet, doesn’t it?”

“I already told you why. He was denying his God. No wonder he died young.”

He was moving toward me with his fists balled. I’m not normally all that brave when it comes to physical confrontations. But on that afternoon I was in a rage and I stood my ground. “You got it wrong, Gelper,” I said. “He knew the conclusion *you’d* jump to. That his results supported *your* notions of creation. And he didn’t want that. He wasn’t denying God. He was denying your vision of things. He was denying *you*. He sacrificed everything rather than allow you to misread his work.”

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Harvey informs me the odds against life in any one place are so remote that they exceed the estimated number of worlds in biozones in the entire universe by a factor of three. If we assume that the sort of life we know, the carbon-based type that needs liquid water, is the only kind possible, then the chances were two to one against the appearance anywhere of a single living creature. We got lucky. That’s what Harvey says.

But the estimate of the number of eligible planets is wildly speculative. Nobody has a clue how big the universe actually is. So all the talk about probabilities is, in the end, just talk.

Still, when I look at the night sky now, it’s different from what it used to be. It feels cold. And impersonal. Just a machine.

I wonder if Frank Gelper had felt the same way. And if, in the end, that was the real reason he kept everything to himself.

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