

# Stranger in the night

The journey of a lifetime.

Salvador Nogueira

"So, Hawking, are you ready to unveil the greatest mystery in the Universe?" asked Mike. After a slight delay, an artificial, mechanized voice answered back. "In what way?"

"Oh boy, I wish I could go with you." Mike was the chief engineer in Project Asimov, and Hawking was his brainchild: the very first space probe to be sent to Alpha Centauri, the closest star to our Sun.

Thirty years earlier, astronomers had detected a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere on a rocky planet around the largest of the three stars in that system. At first, they thought the composition was sustained by biological activity, but a couple of abiogenic scenarios had come to light. All attempts to communicate with any possible civilization there had failed. The only remaining option had been to send a spacecraft to do a fly-by, up close.

And there they were, eight years later, making final preparations for launch, on top of a large expendable rocket, in Alcantara, Brazil — the cheapest place from which to get to orbit, in terms of the energy required.

"Why do you not come with me, Michael?" asked Hawking, in its usual monotone.

"I wish I could, pal. But no way could we build a ship large enough for both of us."

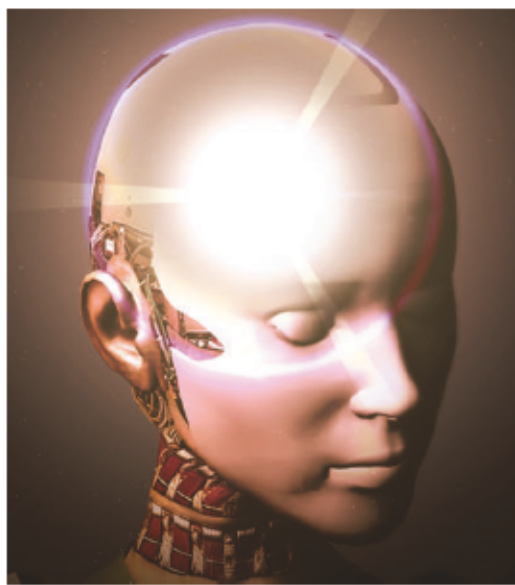
"I will miss you, Michael." The engineer almost felt emotion in the voice, and paused simply to gaze at his companion. What a beautiful piece of machinery it was. Really sad to see it go. The best of the best in Artificial Intelligence, designed to represent mankind in a possible contact with aliens. Well, almost as good as the real thing, he thought. "I'll miss you too, pal."

He had been working closely with Hawking since the beginning of the project ("Since you were a bunch of silicon," he used to joke), but never thought of it as more than a sophisticated computer. It looked perfectly self-aware — but was it? Mike never bought into that Turing crap. It was just a piece of equipment, period. But now, during final testing before launch, he could almost touch the anxiety emanating from that so-called 'it'.

"What will happen to me?" enquired the probe.

Mike didn't bother at first, automatically

entering babble mode. "What do you mean? You've heard the story a thousand times. After we finish here, we will turn off your cognitive functions — power is a precious asset in a tiny spaceship, you know. Then the spaceship will clear Earth orbit with chemical propulsion and, after that, turn on the matter-antimatter engines. It will reach cruise speed of 0.1c after ten months and, five years before arrival, you'll be turned on. Your instructions are



to check all the onboard instruments and send periodical reports to Earth. You should..."

"You do not understand, Michael. What will happen to me when you turn me off?"

Mike was stunned. "Well...well...I suppose you'll...it would be like sleeping, but without dreaming."

"I have never slept before."

"But you've been turned off before. For brief moments, but you were. Do you have any memory of ever being turned off?"

"No, I have no memory of that. It seems like I was always functioning."

"Well, then. It will be just like that." Mike seemed relieved. "Now, see what values you're getting from your main spectrometer, will ya?"

Hawking reacted promptly, offering the stream of data through a monitor temporarily connected to it. "I was never alone."

"What?"

"My perception is that I was always turned on, and never alone. How is it to be alone, Michael?"

"Well, it's...lonely." That was the best

Mike could do, without further encouraging Hawking's apprehension. But the first word he thought of was 'sad'.

"Will I ever go back?"

"I guess not, Hawk. But, c'mon, who knows what's out there? Maybe you'll find some people and they could send you back — if you manage to establish contact. The adventure, the quest for the unknown, my friend, that's the main reason for this journey."

"Maybe I lack the spirit of adventure then."

Mike didn't know what to say. And he didn't need to.

"Maybe I do not want to go."

"What do you mean, you don't wanna go? Hawk, this is the greatest adventure ever. If I could, I'd switch places with you anytime!" Mike finished checking the data on his computer and was ready to clear the bay. "Well, Hawky-boy, like it or not, I guess this is it. I have to turn you off now, so this is 'goodbye'. Have fun, it will be just great, you'll see!"

An agonizing silence followed. Two, then three seconds.

"Goodbye, Mike."

The engineer left, and darkness took over. Hawking's conscience was turned off, but it was still there. Yes, it was there. Alone.

Two days later, the rocket performed magnificently and sent Hawking on its way. The launch put it in a trajectory towards Jupiter, and the giant planet would then give the gravitational pull to send it towards Alpha Centauri.

Everything was just fine on board, except for Hawking, strangely awake. So alone. And it didn't want to be. It could feel all the parts of the ship, as if they were its own. It played with all the instruments, the antennas, the robotic arms. It wanted to end it all. He wanted to end it all. And then, one final command, and he finally ceased to be. The magnetic containment for the antimatter failed, producing a splendid blast in the sky. The scientists on Earth were troubled; the cause for the failure was completely unknown to them. More puzzling yet, all telemetry ceased about two minutes before the explosion. No more loneliness. No more fear. No more. ■

Salvador Nogueira is a science writer from *Folha de S. Paulo*, a major Brazilian daily newspaper, and author of *Rumo ao infinito* ('To the infinite'), a book about the future of space exploration.

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