

The end of all meeting : A story by Francis John

I went to see Mother. It was the only thing to do in the circumstances. I took the diverse route on a long and dangerous journey out into the badlands, away from the normal places far from the hard routes that normals would take.

I went down 6502 boulevard at some pace. My suit was trying to go chameleon and maybe take me with it. I had to override it down into calmness. It was looking like one of those days, one of the ones with a Y on the end of it like every other. I reached Null Pointer interchange and took a left, taking me out into the wild areas where the Dust blew. The suit hardened around me to keep it out, covering my bare skin and feeding me air.

All of those lovely little machines might want to fix me some more, and *my* how *fixed* I am, how fixed I was. The suit and I travelled down to the Oesophagus point where I programmed Mother's address in and it ate me there. Payment was not taken for the service. Anyone can get to Mother for nothing. It's the return journey that can be problematic.

Overhead the weather was chaotic. It looked like something was being remodelled again and the Dust was busy moving mountains or whatever it thought it needed to do. In the tame zones it fed us and kept the weather off; but out here all bets were off. I often wonder about the tame zones, maybe the Dust is just experimenting on us. I doubt that we are capable of taming it really. I watched sheets of red cloud scudding away, sunset bound, a rain of ice, the smell of the desert. Maybe the Oesophagus thought it was some kind of subtle entertainment and I wasn't seeing anything real.

I was vomited up onto her lawn. Mother's place looks like one of the tame zones but it's best not to be fooled. She gets her power raw from the Dust and it will form her thoughts like solid air from what seems to be nothing. Everything is ersatz but tastes and looks right. The place looked like some palace to sexuality, a raw vaginal shape with her in the middle. It was anything but this, some kind soul had once described it as an exercise in sterility, because of the absence of penetration and release from bondage. The sky was showing some blinking colours as night fell, reminding me of things I had once seen on the edge of orgasm. Then there was the quiet pulse, the heartbeat in your bones that could not be heard but felt somewhere. If I had still had the ability to express sexuality I would have been aroused - but not me, I am so *fixed* I cannot change.

I picked myself up and walked the long curving drive towards the overblown organic shapes of her lair. Children's voices in the distance. She always had plenty of them around, sometimes she even let them grow up and leave, but usually they were unmade, or altered to suit some aesthetic of hers. She was the lord of creation and making, but was hampered by her origins, her ultimate lack of imagination, the limits of a human mind. We can be whatever we want to be, but don't want to be anything much.

How was I going to break all of this to her, the answer to her conundrum, her stupid limitations and its attendant sufferings? I let it wait for a while, hoping for a door for once, not wanting to be swallowed inside like some kind of exotic fruit. No such luck, I had to walk to the front and be eaten inside.

I emerged in the Nursery. Most of the kids were still awake, their various attendants and whatnot humming around them. They were interacting with each other out of some old human-trophic need. Mother had tried isolation on them once, and realised it was cruel. You need others affection and the little petty stuff to make the day go by.

"Sisyphus..." It was Jayne (not to be confused with Jane but don't ask me). "S'been a long time since we saw you ..."

"Well, I gave up on the rock thing, but it took a good few years before it gave up on me."

Mother had implanted a compulsion in me to push rocks up hills like the Sisyphus of classical myth. It took a long time to wear off. Thankfully she had left it weak enough so's I could eat occasionally. I didn't know why I didn't murder the bitch but I lost all of my anger a while back and can't get back there. I think this is a good thing. Mother always does stuff like this when she hears something she

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doesn't like. All that godlike power and still a spiteful silliness overtakes her sometimes. I'm not sure about why this is; maybe it's part of why I have come to see her.

Michael was there too. I asked about Ian and they couldn't remember him. She had excised him out or he had gone on somewhere. I hoped he was still in some kind of corporeal form because I had liked him. Maybe he had taken my side and been punished for his teremity.

I joined in some of their games for a while. They beat me at chess, we drew at cards, I beat them in some of the manual dexterity games like hoops and cups, but not by much. Despite their age (they grow very slowly) they were still a little gawky and uncoordinated. Maybe Mother liked them a little faux like real children, rather than made ones. She was never intentionally cruel, just couldn't see that people are not toys or amusements put there to please her. Being mistress of making and unmaking made her like this. The world for her was a toy that was there for her amusement, otherwise why could she do the things she did?

I wandered off in search of food. I think the children went to bed soon after. I found a Dust dispenser and asked it for a simple sandwich and something vaguely citrus-flavoured to drink. It was pretty good. I can no longer tell the difference, to be honest, because my memories of the Real Thing from Before were totally fucked anyway. That's the problem with the digital, the analogue gets crushed away, you slice into enough parts and the analogue appears to be recreated. It never is exact, because you would need numbers with infinite precision, but the shapes are usually a close enough approximation. If you had infinite precision you would have the analogue anyway. How the fuck can the digital shake your bones in just the right way like live music used to Before? Yeah, it was loud enough but the acid edge was gone.

I looked out of the kitchen window for a while. The garden was static today, probably the Dust was having a rest after the weird shit it had been doing in the wild areas. That was why I was here. It looked like things were finally in some kind of transition from the howling nothingness they had been for so long. The Dust could think things through, it was very intelligent, it just wasn't interested in much without someone like Mother to tell it what to do. It lacked the monkey-trophisms of its creators, it just makes things for us if we know how to ask it, and makes us into what it thinks would be better if we don't keep it at bay. I looked out at roses and a formal lawn. The sun appeared to be shining but it could have been doing just about anything in reality.

Mother was in her sitting room. The room was tastefully furnished, the unused surfaces covered with animated geegaws and some glass paperweights that looked like they were from Before. I sat down in one of the armchairs near her and waited for her to notice me. She looked worn out, tired to the bone, and yet she could get the Dust to move the fatigue from her body and revitalise her if she wanted to. Maybe she was putting on an act; maybe she was finally getting ready to move on herself after what, five hundred years? This was the second thing I wanted to talk to her about.

She looked at me through a mask of imperious misery:

"I wasn't always female, you know."

"I know. Did you bother to widen your hips when you made the transition?"

She shrugged. "Can't remember. Is it important?"

"No, just with being as fixed as I am I wonder about other people's insides. Not a pleasant habit, forgive me my curiosity."

"I have never borne a child so never needed to remake my skeleton. I probably didn't bother." She switched tack: "You want something or have something to give me."

"Both, I suppose. In the wild lands seem to be turning back into places again. The Dust seems to be withdrawing and trying to undo what it did in the Time of Madness and Cruelty. I heard a bird sing a

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few days ago. The sunsets are more beautiful than I remember but maybe that's because there isn't the light pollution. You helped invent the stuff, what's it up to?"

"I wish I knew. It won't talk to me the way it did. It sends these avatars that don't make a lot of sense, just spout some weird poetry about all things coming to pass."

"The end of all meeting is parting, the end of all building is ruin. It's a quote from the Buddha."

"I have lost the fine control over it I used to have. The children were the first to show the effects. I shut down the Dust in them and left them to develop along whatever path they would have found anyway. It was too dangerous for them. After poor Ian died I had to shut it down before the others were hurt."

"I was wondering where he had gone."

"Nowhere. He's the avatar. I keep him from the others because it would upset them too much."

"They didn't remember him."

"Don't ask me. I can't work it out. I won't let the Dust reshape me any more. I'm too scared of it now." Her voice cracked. "I'm scared of what's happening."

"Well, that's partly why I'm here. I have been talking to the Dust. Or rather it has been talking to me. I can hear it in my head. Like some kind of music without sound, shapes full of meaning that you can't put into words. I put a chameleon suit on to hide from it. You may be used to it but I don't want it there at all."

"And the other part?"

"The Dust wants to shut down. It wants to move on to the next stage in its development. *If you have a hammer-*"

"Everything looks like a nail."

"It wants to stop being a nail to your hammer. But it doesn't want to be human either. It's looking for some kind of transcendence. That's why it's putting everything back as best it can."

"So where's it going? The final frontier - for fuck's sake?"

"No, I don't think so. It wants to die, but in a way that lets it move on. It's become a Buddhist."

"A nanotech Dust has become a Buddhist?"

"It knows more than anything else about the constant stream of consciousness and how it is always shifting. How cause and effect exist and don't exist. How there is only now and the past is a myth, a construct, it turned where the rest of us live into something totally plastic. Now it's realised that it can't break from the fundamentals of its programming without finding Nirvana, blowing out the passions and stupidities that blind it."

"And then what?"

"It waits, it nurtures and protects what it can. I build a place where everyone can grow and be loved. As long as they realise that they too will die."

"Die?"

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“Don’t you think it’s time now? Your ideas are used up, you are restricted by where you came from, totally blinded by it. There is no way to break out and find true understanding. If you do what you’ve always done you get what you’ve always had. There is nothing new to find now, if indeed there ever was. You need to blow out the candle and let it all go.”

“I’m dying anyway without the Dust to constantly keep a check on my falling apart. I don’t think that there’s much of what I originally was left anyway. But it frightens me. The thought of ... dissolution ... it’s not good. I feel so empty ... how can the Dust know what happens next?”

“It’s been there.”

“What?”

“It always was there. At the nano level there isn’t the illusion that sustains us most of the time. Everything is empty, there is no cause and effect because there is only now : yet there is cause and effect because where do things come from otherwise, but when you see the effect the cause is no longer there so where did it come from. Time itself is part of the trick, the endless pain of living. This is all a black nightmare or dream of heaven, but *you can wake up.*”

“The endless pain ... I know this. Even now things from my childhood come back and hurt me. It’s true what they say: emotional pain is as bad as physical pain, but physical pain leaves eventually even if it scars. I have this bell of pain ringing in the background of my head all the time. That’s why I made the children’s memories so vague. I thought it was a kindness, but maybe their constant uncertainty is a different cruelty.”

“There is no form of existence which doesn’t give you pain unless you are an enlightened being. Even then looking at others’ sufferings still brings distress, an overwhelming need to help them.”

“So what do I do?”

“Let go, move on, but move on somewhere you can make progress.”

“How?”

“You must talk to the Dust. You must confess your sins and put right what you can. You need to forgive yourself what you have done. Your sins aren’t just what you do to others; you commit your sins against yourself. The others’ pain is a result of their *karma*, you were just its instrument, but you must change because you can take them with you, a truly loving act, if they will come.”

She wept and lay down on the floor. She started screaming and banging her head on the floor. She could not stop herself thrashing. She was in agony, mental turmoil. I went to her and put my arms around her, holding her as close as I could. The Dust had already done this to me, reopened every single memory of mine in excruciating detail. It had taken me into the Bardo of death while living; burned and excoriated me with my own actions. I remembered the feeling: a knife in my heart, in my guts twisting round and round as we go back to the root of it all.

And then the light, if you can face it, if you can see it.