

Down at System Error

A story by Francis John

1. Deep Level

I went down to Deep Level via the side roads, turning this way and that across the highway avoiding the high-sided data trams moving slow requirements towards some long destination. I turned left into the old town of System Error and went down Null Pointer Exception Avenue towards the town hall. I had an appointment with the Majorette there, whatever.

The doors were the fantastically irritating glass ones with no visual cues that meant you could easily find yourself feeling trapped there, pushing on a hinge, if you weren't paying attention. The inhabitants of System Error liked things like that. Traps for the unwary and possibly unwelcome tourists coming down the pipe.

At reception I talked politely to the cyberdog guarding the building. It handed me a direction finder which would also open the doors on the way.

"Stay on the path and have a nice day."

"I will endeavour to do both, thanks."

What else could I say? I passed up through the steel floor into the heart of the building. I've never been fond of glass elevators, they make me giddy and I don't like seeing the counterbalancing weights of the lift going past me at speed. I went high. She was on the top floor, looking out over a domain of conservative freaks.

Her office greeted me, recognising the finder and my retina with practised ease. I went through the doors into a room where she was standing looking out over her domain. Due to the webcast illusion it appeared that all of the walls were windows, the door I had just come through making some nano change to disappear.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"The road bitch said something about missing people, again. This time some status dudes with connections. So you have to care a little."

"We cared last time, just couldn't find anything. We always care - that's why people like to live here."

"I couldn't argue with that, but the missing ones were transients, hard to care for. You didn't know where they came from or where they went. Are these the same?"

"They aren't local, but they are known. Ever heard of the Dogs of Jackal?"

"Heavy horses up the spinway - hard to move, lots of inertia. Hard and soft ware. We tangled once, a long time ago, we respect each other."

"Well, Youngblood 3 went missing in broad nano light yesterday. The ground just opened up and ate him."

"Lady, I thought the nano here was tame, that's another reason for living here."

"It *is*. Someone overrode our controls and morphed him out of here."

"I thought Youngblood 3 was a she?"

"Well, you know how it is in the nano breakers. Who knows anything. They merge, play that group mind thing and rebreak back to whatever the mind thinks will work with the future potentials."

"I'm scared of anyone who could pull your controls. Heavy hitters, blackdancers, backwoods, where you think?"

"The Government."

"What? No-one anymore, nothing. They have no mandate because we left them to it after the Great Nano Disaster fucked everything."

"Well, the bastards didn't die, did they? And their secret arm never needed a mandate, did it?"

"So my mission?"

"Recover 3, preferably whole."

"I will do some asking but I don't want to die, m'dear."

"This cancels all debts."

"All?"

"Plus some credit on the side."

"Fuck. I could come out of hibernation with a bit of credit. Dead and credit worthy is not a lot of use tho' but. Let me do some and I'll give you a go/no go."

"End play today."

"No go looks likely then, I need a couple, prob."

"Tomorrow latest or scratch."

"Dunkin' donuts. Give me the codec."

I got the codec and the door morphed back as I left.

Fuck. I would have to go to the Outfitter.

2. Runaway Train

I made slow progress back down to my gaff on the edge of the stable areas. Edgewise is always a more interesting place to live but sometimes the storms get in a little. Then *interesting* becomes rather too mild a word. I placed what I hoped was a secure call to the Outfitter.

"Yeah?"

"'S me. Going out, need some tamers and makers. A nullsuit if you got one."

"You got a backer?"

"Deep Level, but I need to do some. Speculate to accumulate."

"Your track's OK. Come down."

She pressed a codec across the link to me. I left my gaff and went out into the street. I pressed the codec into the road and it opened up, taking me down using the peristaltic wave. I'm pre-nano and I've always found travelling by wave a little disconcerting; I mean, what if it stops and you just get stuck there between levels, or crushed. Hopefully it'd be quick enough.

I was in her workshop. She had laid out the latest stuff for me: a maker with charger, a tamer, a couple of charge packs for each and, of course, the nullsuit.

We haggled for a while. In the end she got 10% of the profit. I liked this arrangement because it meant she had a vested interest in not stiffing me with bad gear.

"Be warned, the suit's had an upgrade. The old software got caught out. Either the wild zone's been learning again or some clever has been teaching it new tricks."

"It does evolve, or so I've been told."

"Software evolvs, yeah, but why should it learn to break through nullsuits? There's no evolutionary imperative to make it do so. The suits just stop the nano trying to change the wearer for what it perceives to be the better by giving you a chameleon layer. Why should it even know there's something behind the chameleon?"

"Was it a breach of some kind?"

"My suits don't breach. I can't ask the wearer, now gone into the Main Consensus."

"Maybe someone breached it with a weapon and let the nano in?"

"Poss. Are you taking conventional weapons out there?"

"No point. Nano is pacifist and just turns the weapons into nothing usable. Toys usually, I think it wants to be ironic."

"You could put it in the suit."

"I don't want the suit to have to work too hard. I'm not ready to sublime."

"You heard the nano's been sending stuff into orbit and the planets?"

"Yeah. But who is the master and the servant any more?"

"Irony is a lost art."

I picked up my stuff and walked into the wave orifice. For all her brilliance she had never walked out in the wild zones herself. Sent probes and stuff to test her gear, but never smelt the ozone and yeast out there.

My next stop was the infobroker. Fortunately I was in deep credit since sharing what I had found out in the Baskerville Incident. The Government, I learned, had some quiet zones out southward, before you reached the mess that used to be London. I didn't bother asking about Youngblood 3, which was a mistake.

3. Out and Out

I codec'd back into my gaff after the wave threw me back up onto the street and began the process of loading for bear. The suit had been keyed to follow me and carry the rest of the stuff. The maker and tamer strapped into the suit's interface. I had some solar rechargers too from ages ago. The power dizzy fitted and checked OK. You never know when your going to have to walk out a long way and solar power had saved me before.

The nullsuit was servo assisted, which was OK but there were no safeties to speak of, given that you don't know what the hell will hit you out there a servo assisted leg break might be preferable to the alternatives, whatever they were at the time.

I looked like something from Ghostbusters, except for the exoskeleton and the head cover. I set the suit to walk to the Periphery and relaxed as best I could while the suit plugged itself into me. I downloaded some of my standard tactical defensive moves into its memory as it walked my body for me. I heard some Edgemen say that they can sleep while the suit walks them but never had to try it, you'd have to be very tired, or injured and past caring.

Habitation stopped abruptly as the suit and I walked out off the Edge into the nano-lands, it looked like farm land to the inexperienced but everywhere the eye rested were millions of escaped robots too small to see, cross linked with human minds hidden somewhere. Whimsical and dangerous. I had my defences : my maker to force it into some safer configuration or useful thing, a tamer to shut it down temporarily, the nullsuit to stop it changing me for the better.

It was the next stage in human evolution, some thought. I think it is just a different path that things can go down. Directed evolution with the odd things that that means, no ecosystem, probably over planned and very unstable inside. Then we have the storms of change that hit everywhere unless you live in a quiet zone where the big corporate tamers keep things under control and people can live without suits. I have no idea what would have happened if we hadn't created that technology. Perhaps the worlds would have been better, but even with the Disaster people had become much kinder to each other. No-one starved any more,

the nano made food anyway. The nano turned swords into plowshares, weapons were a joke, nobody died in the conventional sense. I wasn't in a hurry to find out about this last, even though my mother and some old lovers assured me it was good living in the bioware construct hidden behind the nano. I am a Buddhist and whatever the bioware did I believed I would still go into the bardo and find another body to live in, probably a bird or a rat knowing what I have done in my life.

There was a bird on a wire high above the hedgerow pulsing something across somewhere. Possibly a macroform, I got the suit to give me a closeup and still couldn't tell. The suit's sitrep told me that the nanoconc figures were relatively low, maybe you could breathe here for a while and still escape if you were quick enough. I kept myself zipped up. The nano was remarkably circumspect in dealing with non-human life. It was a conservationist at heart. All of those brains indiscriminately absorbed had made it very conservative.

I got the suit to look the bird up in a gazeteer and it was there so maybe it was just what it appeared to be, maybe it was swimming in nano. I needed to get further into the *out*, where I could use my maker to summon up some kind of transport. It was possible that my last set of wheels hadn't been deconstituted but I wasn't holding my breath. It had been a while since the last debacle forced me into hibernation to avoid my creditors.

There was plenty of power out here, the network of nodes lapping up the sun, storing for a rainy day. Like I say, knowing what was going on underneath was difficult, we had gone back to the forests and fears of the so-called dark ages.

I was in luck, some other intrepid traveller had left a now-decomposing 4x4. It was kind of abbreviated but servicable. I got the suit to run some analysis on it and it had a standard interface and the suit couldn't detect any trojans. On we go, I ran a maker check to help it restore its runability, just a quick job. I set course for the old roadway, grinding through the empty spaces. The roads were still there and passable, just a bit spooky and empty. I could remember the heavy traffic, but no-one could build tamers strong enough to make them viable again. No-one wanted too, either, not when you could vurt yourself anywhere you wanted to be.

I was going to talk to the government at one of their centres, at least that's what the infobroker had told me. I sat back and let the car drive across the broken motorways. The nano had turned the tarmac into some rubbery substance that gripped well and could take the seismic movements to an extent. It was odd looking at the farmland, watching it returning to the forest of old. The cattle and sheep were wild now, no-one attended them, it was too hard and the nano made us edible meat anyway.

In terms of physical distance it wasn't far but in terms of the character of the stable zones it was a long way. Not many people would make this journey, even in protected vehicles. The suit informed me that we were entering a controlled zone but it still looked pretty wild to me, the concentrations were low enough to allow you to breathe without a suit if you wanted to, the small amounts of nano being controlled by your immune system.

I needed to find their equivalent of an infobroker and just ask where Youngblood 3 was. The answer would give me some idea of what was needed to get him/her released. Tricky though, the spinway and the government were never friends, the spinway being the least stable of the stable areas and its inhabitants liking it that way. Me, I usually wore a suit, but they had this group mind and physical rebuild thing going that wasn't part of the Main Consensus and they needed their semi-wild nano to make it happen for them.

I followed the road into a small town at the edge of the Pennines and went looking for a 'broker. I triggered the suit to ask the local net where one was and it guided me down across a canal bridge to what looked like a telephone box, one of the original red ones for some kind of whimsey. It had a standard port in there. I hadn't seen a lot of people about and those I had looked suspicious of the suit. I wasn't worried, these government types do nothing without everything being done four times for them. They swapped their initiative for personal safety. Seemed even more inbred than they had been since I was last here, if anything. I would have thought their planners would be a bit more careful.

"Welcome to GovCom, your status is guest. What do you require of us today?"

"Inquire status emmisary from area System Error - may I raise and talk to someone?" Ah, the old Machine Language, how it comes tripping off the tongue.

"Credentials?"

I codec'd what the System Error people had given me. The machine went quiet while summoning a human being. It spoke again.

"Wait there. I'll join you in five."

Face to face is still the most secure.

4. Elf and the Bungalow

She was small and looked a bit Improved. Extra muscles under the coat. Not cold when she perhaps should have been. Green eyes. Very pretty. An ideal candidate for negotiating with someone with my weaknesses. I am old enough to be her father, if she had one, if she was as young as she looked.

"You are?"

"Elf, as in, shall we say, Eleven. But I prefer Elf."

"A construct?"

"Improved. This is the eleventh version of what I was."

I shrugged, this kind of candour was most usual. Myself I am still mostly what I was born with some improvements in strength and concentration. "Never mind. I come to make some face to face enquiries about a matter which is bothering the Majorette at System Error."

"Which is what?"

"Apparently one of the spinway types was swallowed away and the finger points here, or at least the Government - so they tell me."

"Who?"

"Youngblood 3."

"I can neither confirm nor deny this, but she lives yet. I will say that Youngblood's 2 and 4 live here. They left their Consensus. Maybe you could talk to them?"

"Those spooky bastards - why would they want to live here?"

"Ask them."

I shrugged and thanked her for her time. She had deliciously cheeky eyes and my old heart turned over, but I kept it under control.

I was handed a finder that would take me to the Youngbloods' residence which told me they knew why I was here and had prepared the whole thing before I arrived. Not unexpected.

I morphed the suit into something that looked like a jacket and trousers and followed the funder down some winding roads and up a hill that didn't seem to want to end. Maybe I should have driven, I panted to myself up the steep hill. Maybe the walk would do me good.

They were living in a fucking suburban bungalow with a neat garden! These were people who had ridden their half tame nano into any shape or form the imagination could conceive and they wanted to live in a suburban bungalow! Ah well, retro chic never really went out of fashion, just the definition of retro.

I walked past what I assumed was a reproduction of some super mini car and entered the drive. It was all of a piece, the bell even played a bit of *Pomp and Circumstance*, not the *Land of Hope and Glory* bit but the section that leads up to it. They had gone the whole way and it was beginning to upset me.

"Burnout, my dear", said 2, who wanted to be called Frank now. 4 had decided to be called Doris but I drew the line there so she had to settle for Dottie, which was closer.

I was sipping tea in the back garden, overlooking a carp pond and ornamental planting. We were discussing why they had left the Youngblood Consensus. They looked some indeterminate fortyish age, but who knew how long it had been, really, since their Consensus came into being.

"We left because we couldn't think of anything new. Just wanted to stop, stop sharing, stop making, stop running, stop being derivative of our selves. There's only so much self-reference you can stand if you are a maker before it become too stale for words."

"The rest of us admire you, your bravery, your imagination. You can't just give up."

"Well we did, and we have. It was like modern art before the Disaster. Just self referencing crap. You could shape anything into anything, print whole things out of the air, but hardly anyone is any good at it."

"Do you know where 3 is?"

"No, he's probably looking for us."

I noticed that they knew the new effective gender of 3 but didn't let it show.

Dottie broke in - "he didn't want us to leave. He wanted to turn us into permanent nodes for the consensus, never living in bodies, memory devices consulted as personalities occasionally."

"But for us," said Frank, "personality is everything."

I drank their tea and we talked about some of their exploits. There are those who suspect the wild nano's whimsy came from their Consensus in the early days.

I am a Buddhist. Trust me, personality is nothing, it gets in the way and keeps you trapped. These people had been gods to the rest of us and now chose to be middle aged mortals living in a manufactured comfort. There was nothing I could say to them about this that they were equipped to understand. They did let slip that Elf was their daughter, but whether she had been born or made wasn't a polite topic of conversation.