

The Night That was Different

by

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The Night That was Different

“If you seek his monument, look around you”

Epitaph to Sir Christopher Wren

He was dying alone. Outside, death waited in the poisoned wind that howled across the land where no life had been for a thousand years; and inside him, death grew slowly. He knew he was dying, but the knowledge had only driven him to work harder, more furiously, seeking the cure not for his own death, but for the dead planet outside.

To him it sometimes seemed as if he had always been here, as if all the rest of his life was nothing more than a dream. In fact it was only fourteen months since he had first heard of the project, and he himself was only twenty-six years old.

He was not a stranger to death, he had seen it many times since his ninth birthday, but tonight the first sight of it came back clearly to his mind, its horror unchanged by the years. It had been a Friday night, and he was with his father and brother coming home. They were walking, because his father was strict about that, and he had dawdled behind on some pretext or other, as small boys do, while his father and brother walked on ahead. It was that which saved him. The other two had just walked out from the far end of the tunnel under the monorail when half a dozen dark figures jumped them from above. It was a Purity Band. They must have been lying in wait, knowing that it was Friday, knowing that they would have to pass that way.

He saw the bodies afterward, the Purists must have used everything they had, sticks, knives, broken bottles, anything that could maim or kill. He had hidden in the shadow of a doorway and listened, frozen with fear, while they boasted to each other about their “victory”, as the Party newspapers would have called it. He thought that they might have looked for him as well, but gradually the sound of their boasting disappeared into the distance. Eventually he had come out from hiding and run home to tell his mother. Only afterwards, he remembered, had he broken down and cried.

He was past tears now, but he could still remember other times when he had cried; when his mother had died of overwork, and a lack of simple drugs any citizen would have had immediately; when he himself had fallen foul of a Purity Band who had been in a good mood, and only beaten him up a little; when he had come home to find his furniture and clothes dumped in the street for anyone to ransack, and someone else installed in his flat, and known he dare not protest, he had no rights.

But he could also remember the tears he and all his people had cried at the Deliverance, when the Leader's coup d'etat had destroyed the old regime and the tyranny that had gone with it. He could remember hearing the Edict of Tolerance read out over the radio. His sisters had cried tears of joy, and he found that his eyes were full as well.

As soon as the restrictions were lifted he had applied for a place at the University. In fact he had been the first one of his people to be accepted. There had been problems over diet, special arrangements had had to be made, because he could not eat the normal food of most of his fellow students.

He had done well in biochemistry, and it was as a direct result that he had been invited to join the Project. There were many others better qualified, but none of his people. He had been approached at first with the general proposal, the public version, of finding a new home for their people, where they could have a nation of their own again. Only later after he had accepted and joined the Project did he learn the full

truth. The “new” home was not to be new, but the old home, the planet from which his ancestors had fled a thousand years ago, during the Last War, so-called because it had destroyed all life on the planet in a senseless conflict with their own neighbours and nearest kin, and created the desolation that now lay outside his window.

The aim of the project was simply to clean away the poisonous waste, and to make the land clean and wholesome and pleasant again. His task would be to open the way. The only poisons left in the atmosphere were chemical. The biological had become extinct, the radioactives had decayed, even most of the more deadly and complex nerve gases had decayed. Only the poisoned atmosphere and the dead soil were left, and it was theoretically possible to breed mutated strains of plants which could survive the poisons, and break them down, cleaning the air and soil, and providing the basis for an ecology. Reclamation would follow, slowly but surely, provided he could turn theory into practice, and make the dead land bloom.

Outside the window now he could see the first signs of his success. Rows of plants, the front rows mostly withered and dead, but a few still green and struggling, while towards the back, a group of plants grew vigorously, dark green leaves forming a small bush, and in the heart of the bush the first red blooms beginning to show. Where once these hardiest plants had pioneered, eventually the less hardy ones would be able to grow, and after them, when they had cleaned the soil, and built up a first layer of humus, other plants could grow, and then as the air became cleaner, animals would be introduced, and then his people would return and the old promise would be fulfilled again.

And he would see none of it, because by then he would be dead, and others would inherit the land. According to the doctors he had about six to eight weeks to live, no more.

“If we could have treated it a few years ago”, one of them had said, and looked professionally sad, as if it was just bad luck that a few years ago he had not been a citizen, and therefore had no medical treatment, apart from that prescribed for his people in their own Law.

The greatest irony was that it was only that sentence of death which had made success possible. At first, after discovering his condition, the Project Team had reacted, as was to be expected, by looking for a replacement. For his part he had spent four days and nights trying to drink himself insensible, to forget that in a few months he would be dead.

On the fourth day he had been thrown out of the last pub, as a drunken nuisance, and ended up wandering around the town crying to himself. When he finally sobered up enough to recognise his whereabouts, he was back in his old childhood surroundings. In front of him was the tunnel under the old monorail. The track was rotting now, the line had been closed down some years earlier, but the tunnel was still open. In front of him was the house in whose doorway he had hidden that night. The roof had fallen in, and the windows had no glass, but the doorway was still intact.

He stood and looked at it as if he were in a dream, reaching out to touch the words on the plaque beside the door, until suddenly he came to himself, with the realisation that he was stiff with cold, and with standing too still too long. The sun had risen, and all the shadows in the old ruined house had gone.

It was as if the shadows had gone from his mind as well. He went back to his flat, cleaned himself up, drank black coffee until his head cleared, then went back to Project Control. It took him a week of arguing and persuading before they agreed to take him back. In the end they only gave in when he pointed out that since they would

not need to supply food and fuel for a two-way trip, there would be room for more experimental plants, and so more chance of success. He could transmit his results back, and the next manned expedition could salvage the ship. They were reluctant, but they had no alternative. There was literally no other person among his people with the same qualifications, and to choose an outsider would be unthinkable.

The doctors had given him ten months of active life, then gradually increasing disability and pain for two months, then the end. At peace now, he had watched the extra boxes of seeds and seed trays being loaded. Among those last boxes, he now knew, had been the seeds of the dark green bush with red flowers, which grew outside his window. It was not a plant they had many hopes for, but thousands of years ago the robe of his people's High Priests and the pillars of their temple had been decorated with it, so they included it as a last experiment. In the end it had been the one wholly successful experiment, but that one was enough.

Throughout the flight he worked from waking till sleeping, driven by his all too literal deadline. Once in orbit he worked for 36 hours non-stop, collating the old maps with the torn and ruined land below him. In theory, any place on the planet would serve. In practice for him, and for all his people, only one place, one small country on the whole globe, would do.

He located the general area quickly, to the east of a large inland sea. It took a little longer to fit together the more detailed geography. He was looking for a hill, with the ruins of a city on it. It had had many names in the past, but he thought of it not by the common name, but by the name it had been given back at the dawn of his people's history, Moriah.

He found the place at last, but even the ruins of the city had decayed, leaving only a grey-brown cloak of sand and rubble. In two places only was there any change in the desolation, one was an old wall which had withstood the ages, and still rose its massive blocks against the rubble. The other place was by a skull-shaped rocky outcrop to the north of the dead city, here there seemed to be less rubble, and the high ground offered some protection.

He chose this as his test site, and carefully planted the seeds he had brought so far. He made for himself an airtight shelter in one of the caves in the side of the rocky knoll, and he waited, watching the new life grow outside, and knowing death was growing inside him.

Now at last his work was complete. His report had been sent, and there was nothing more to do. Soon the great seed-bearing ships would come, provided by a government who wanted to wipe out the guilt of centuries of persecution. Armies of robots would spread out with vast stores of the one successful strain of seed. Later they would go out again with seeds of the other plants which had shown some promise in his trial beds. The work he had done would be repeated on a scale a million times greater, and within 50 years the air would become breathable again. Then his people could return to build a new home on the land they had redeemed.

Except, of course, that in a few months he would be dead, and he would see none of it.

Since that night by the ruined house by the monorail he had often thought about his death. He knew his supplies would outlast him, but he also knew his last weeks would be painful. Properly speaking, suicide was forbidden to his people, but the doctors back at Project Control had given him a small box with three small capsules in it. "Any one", they said, "will be enough". He had kept them, and decided long ago

how he would use them. Today was the most important day in his people's calendar, it was also his chosen day.

He had woken at his normal time, and performed his morning chores for the last time. He completed his log, giving details of what he intended to do, then set about the preparation for his last meal. He took meat from the freezer (it should have been fresh, but never mind), and the flat cakes of bread. While the meat cooked he took the remaining seeds and filled his pockets with them, then he laid the places at the table in the proper fashion.

Before he ate, he dressed himself in his protective suit, leaving only the helmet tipped back, but otherwise ready to leave at a moments notice. He ate slowly, tasting the bitter herbs and the heavy bread. It felt strange. He had never before eaten this meal alone, even during the worst of the persecution they had always managed to meet, if not as a family then at least as guests of another family, to eat together and to hear the ancient ritual of words said, question and answer. Now he could only repeat them in his mind, until he came to the last words, the wish to meet next year, in their old home. He was the first in a thousand years to gain that wish and to claim his inheritance. At that point he broke down and wept for a while.

Afterwards he cleared away and tidied up, then picked up the small box of capsules, and walked out of the ship. As he closed the airlock door he reached out and touched the engraved panel beside the door, and repeated to himself for the last time the words it bore.

He had chosen that if he must die, then at least he would rather have his body serve some useful purpose, with its abundance of organic chemicals, by serving as a source of food for the plants, so he walked towards where the ground seemed best. As he walked he scattered seeds around him.

When he reached the spot he had chosen, sheltered from the worst winds, he stopped and took out all the remaining seeds and spread them around himself. Then he took the box of capsules and placed it on the ground while he took off his protective suit, keeping only the breathing mask and air supply. The air stung his flesh, but it did not matter for a few moments. Then he knelt down on the ground, and looked around him for the last time. He prayed briefly to the God of his people. He thanked him for his inheritance around him, asked him to accept his imperfect sacrifice, and to let his mercy pass over the land, to heal it.

Then he threw his mask away, leaned forward and took up a capsule. He bent down and kissed the land on which he sat, put the capsule in his mouth and bit hard.

* * *

The settlers came years later. They wore no protective suits, only breathing masks, for the air was cleaner now. They found the ship and read the log, then they went outside to look for the body.

Beyond the ship was a small plot full of plants of all kinds, with prominent among them a bush with dark green leaves and small red flowers. To one side a trail of vegetation led away toward a rise in the ground, which stood a little apart from the bulk of the hill on which the old city had been built. They followed the line of vegetation and at its far end found the caves and the remains of the air-tent. But there was no sign of a body, except that in the shadow of the knoll, on a patch of better ground, rose the largest clump of bushes of all.

The leader of the group paused for a while, then gave certain orders to one of his crew. That night the group departed. They took with them the spaceship, and a memory; they left behind them a marker stone, with the dead man's name on it. They did not place the marker by the spaceship, they left it by the rocky outcrop, where all around the marker the bright red flowers of the pomegranate bushes danced for joy in the sweetening wind, before the God of Heaven, in the city of David, in Jerusalem, in the land of Moriah.

“Why is this night different?”

“We were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord our God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.”

From the Sedar – for Passover Eve.