

Sci Phi: Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy

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Requiem for a Silent Planet by Stephen Dedman

Finding a place to land was depressingly easy, even if there were plants growing through the tarmac. Sally waited impatiently inside the airlock while I did the standard environment checks. Radscans clear, except that it was 41C outside, but the com said that was within normal parameters for this part of the world. Chem clear. Bio... traces of pollens we hadn't encountered before, but no new pathogens. I ran the bioscan again while Sally chewed her lip, then nodded. "Clear," I said. "Equalizing pressure. Homer, this is Vanguard 1. We've landed." Sally was down the ramp a second after the outer door opened, looking around, the smartguns on her forearms following her gaze. "Clear," she repeated. Mal and Gus sighed, and we shouldered our packs and let the straps adjust themselves. We'd trained in one gravity – even Mal, who was used to much less – but it still felt strange stepping outside. It didn't help when Gus muttered, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

Sally snorted. "Abandon hope, all ye who fuck with me. I'm loaded for pope." She'd taken the same injection of twenty-first century English that I had, but hadn't done the follow-up practical course. I hated to correct her – all her weapons were mind-linked – but if she said that to a native, she might endanger the mission.

"Bear," I said. She looked blank. "The expression is 'loaded for bear'."

"Pope, bear..." She shrugged. "Extinct species are your field, not mine."

Gus snorted. Actually, his advice wasn't bad: while we'd never lost a team member, none of the leads we'd followed had proved fruitful. The power plants we'd found that were still working had been completely abandoned, the electricity they generated wasted. The occasional bright lights we'd spotted were usually forest fires caused by lightning, or in the case of Cuba, by gestalt rats who'd learned how to use old matches or similar devices. The human communities we'd found so far knew how to make fire, and some had learned to repair or rebuild the ancient windmills – but not electric lights, or radio, or anything else that could be readily detected from orbit. Some were deliberately hiding (still!), some shunned technology, others simply couldn't be bothered. None of them had remembered us, or even the settlers on Mars: if they'd heard of us at all, they'd assumed we were as dead as their grandparents, or had consigned us to the realm of myth along with the corponations. Our mission, gathering enough data on the collapse and the aftermath so that we could re-create it as a VR simulation, a cybernetic afterlife, seemed doomed to failure.

“There,” said Sally, unnecessarily: the tower was glinting in the sun, a pillar of light less than a kilometre away. Some of the mirrors must have been misaligned. Still, we didn’t think it could hurt to look, so we let her lead the way.

* * *

The Mayflower had been less than half-way to Renaissance when they stopped receiving any signals from Earth, but it was already impossible to turn around even if there had been any point in trying. Mars had been on the wrong side of the sun, and the settlers there knew little more than we did of the collapse. Our best guess was that one of the border and/or religious disputes had escalated, gone nuclear or worse, but no-one knew who had pushed it up the last few rungs. That was one thing we hoped to establish: not the most important any more, perhaps, more a matter of curiosity - but curiosity had sent us to Renaissance and back, so this wasn’t exactly a giant leap by comparison, though you could argue that it was for all mankind.

The tower was surrounded by a high fence on three sides, the Indian Ocean on the other. Knee-high spinifex – the coastal species, not the trioidia more common in the arid interior - hid most of the sand, and fuck knew what sort of traps.

There was no sign of human survivors: Mal confirmed that everything we could see had probably been built long before the silence fell, but built to last.

“What was this place?” asked Sally. “Military base? That stuff on top of the fence looks nasty.”

Mal may have shrugged, but it was hard to be sure: like most Mars-born, he was round-shouldered, and in Earth’s gravity, he seemed to be doing his best to conserve energy. “It may have been,” he agreed. “These stations were designed to provide water and power and some food for about 200 people in an isolated area. Solar updraft tower, tidal power generator, desalination plant, greenhouses, recycling... looking at the rest of the buildings and what records we have, it’s likely they were planning some major project here, maybe even the orbital elevator, before the money ran out. Then it probably became a harbour for coast guard patrol boats, with a tracking station and temporary holding facilities.”

There was a hint of distaste in his voice, though I couldn’t be sure whether this was because of the way Earthians had dealt with their political prisoners, or the sheer ugliness of the buildings. Asking an architect to contemplate atomic era military installations is rather like asking a vegan to make monkey brain soup. Sally looked around at the landscape. “They bothered guarding this? What from?”

“Illegal fishing,” I said. “The stocks of a lot of edible fish species were running out. And illegal immigrants. Mostly greenhouse refugees, by that time: a lot of smaller islands were disappearing.”

“And after the silence,” said Mal, “if they had food and water and power and outsiders didn’t, they probably had to guard against marauders. And maybe the marauders won.”

No-one said anything else as we walked along the crumbling roadway towards the gate and guardhouse, all without seeing any sign of anyone alive except for the flies and seagulls. The guardhouse windows were opaque, as were the skull-sized globes mounted atop the fenceposts. “Knock, knock,” Sally muttered.

Gus cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “COO-EE!”. We stared at him in astonishment, then at the guardhouse, as a voice replied.

We were too far away to make out the words, and after a moment’s hesitation, Sally stepped closer to the gate. “Is anybody home?” she shouted.

This time, the voice was louder and slightly clearer. “English?”

“We speak English,” Gus called, before Sally could answer; then, softly, “Automated?”

“Possibly,” said Mal, though he sounded doubtful, as had the voice. “Power supply should be more than adequate.”

“That doesn’t mean there aren’t people inside,” said Gus, “and even if there’s only a computer, it might have some data we can use. Let’s go.”

We walked towards it until our shadows touched the wall of the guardhouse.

“Who’s there?”

“Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself,” Gus muttered. I was about to reply more sensibly when there was a gasp from the speaker grille, and then the voice demanded, “Who are you, and where from?”

“Scientists,” said Gus. “From Renaissance. Dr Malachi Reed, Dr Kendra Vue... our pilot, Sally Chanawongse. I’m Dr Gus Miranda. May I ask your name?”

“I am Matthew,” said the voice. “Do you want to come in?”

“Are you human?” asked Sally, before anyone else could speak.

There was a faint chuckle. “I do dare all that may become a man,” was the reply, and the gate slid open.

* * *

I’m not sure what I expected Matthew to look like, so I don’t know why I was disappointed to be greeted by a short, scrawny, hook-nosed old man whose skin was almost as pale as his silvery-white hair. The three much younger women who accompanied him looked ready to catch him if he fell, or was blown away by the draught from the air-conditioner. All wore simple belted sleeveless tunics that might once have been motley riots of colour, but had faded to the soft grey of lunar camo: they seemed unconcerned about the weaponry Sally was wearing, but maybe they didn’t recognize it for what it was, or maybe there were other weapons trained on us. The small dusty room, dimly lit by aging LED clusters, didn’t look like a trap, but I suppose a good trap wouldn’t. “He who plays the king shall be welcome”, said Matthew, and chuckled. “Which of you was it?” Gus stepped forwards with a nod that stopped just short of being a bow.

“You say you’re from Renaissance? Where is that?”

“About thirty light years away. Beta Comae Berenices.”

Matthew nodded. “And you’ve come all this way to see us? I’m flattered.” His tone was dry, almost mocking.

“We saw your light on,” said Gus, blandly.

The old man laughed. “We don’t get many visitors: I don’t think Nina,” he nodded at the youngest of the women, “has ever seen anyone who isn’t a member of the family before today... and I’ve never seen a flyer like yours before, though I find it hard to believe you travelled nearly ten parsecs in that.”

“Our mothership is in orbit,” I said. It made sense that someone would have heard the sonic boom as we decelerated, and looked outside in time to see the Vanguard.

“Of course. The Mayflower?”

“Parts of it. Much of it is still on Renaissance, but we recycled some of the components to make a smaller ship, then refuelled it and came home.”

“Home?” Matthew repeated. “Were any of you born here?”

“No,” I admitted. “Our grandparents were...” Great-grandparents in Sally’s case, and great-great in Mal’s, but there didn’t seem any reason to say so.

“Am I being rude? Sorry: I haven’t had any other company for a long, long time. Please excuse an old man’s rusty manners, but if I might ask – what is it you want?”

“We want to know what happened here,” said Gus. “When the radio signals stopped... we thought there must have been a war, some sort of disaster, but we didn’t know. Even on Mars, they couldn’t tell.”

Matthew looked at Mal. “You’re from Mars?”

“Utopia Base,” he said. “We didn’t have a ship that could travel the distance, nor the means to build one. All we had were our telescopes, and they told us almost nothing.”

The old man nodded. “I wasn’t born until after things fell apart: I only know what I’ve read, and what my parents and grandparents told me. Yes, there were wars, people fighting for dry land and clean water, fighting for one sort of power or another... but living here, we didn’t see any of it. We were cut off almost completely; my parents probably knew no more than you on Mars. Fortunately, we had everything we needed here, and when mere anarchy was loosed upon the world, we were able to survive. I’ve even done my best to uphold the family traditions.”

He yawned. “I’m sorry: I tire easily, nowadays. If you would like to stay for dinner, Nina will show you to your rooms.”

* * *

The room smelled as though it had been empty for a long time, but maybe that was my imagination: I’d never smelled a long-empty room before coming to Earth. It would have been a shocking waste of resources. Maybe this just smelled of Earth, though it was much cooler than the peppery dry air outside. “How many of you are living here?” asked Mal, as he looked at the strangely monochrome walls and the bulky but uncomfortable-looking beds.

“Twenty-seven,” said Nina.

“And how many more do you have room for?”

“There are more of you?” There was something like hope in her voice, as well as what might have been wonder.

“There are on the mothership, and on Mars,” Gus replied. “We’d not yet found a spot on Earth for a more permanent settlement.”

“I think we have 400 beds. If there’s something wrong with these...”

“No, these are fine,” Mal reassured her. “Will we meet the others at dinner?”

“Yes. Is there anything more you require? I have duties.”

“Nothing more,” said Gus. “Thank you.” The door slid shut behind her; most of us sat on the beds, except for Mal, who was experimenting with the ways they could be configured.

“A dorm for eight, or family quarters,” he said, pulling a screen out of the wall.

“Not a bad set-up, really, considering.”

“We passed eleven similar doors on the way here,” said Gus. “Do you think they’re hiding something?”

“Probably just private rooms,” said Sally. “They have them to spare, after all. 400 beds, eight to a room, that’s fifty rooms, or nearly two each.”

Gus glowered at her. “That doesn’t mean it isn’t wasteful. If this place can support that many, where are they?”

“We’re surrounded by desert,” I pointed out, “and there are no boats in the harbour. I don’t think they’d get many visitors just happening by: the old man said as much. You can’t accuse them of wasting space, or air, or sunshine, or water – there’s more of all of those here than hundreds of people could use.”

“But the water wouldn’t be drinkable without the technology they have here,” Gus countered. “And they’re keeping that for themselves. They’re hoarders, as well as wasters. Kendra, you know your Dante: remember the fifth circle of Hell?”

"I remember it," I said, pausing just long enough to access it in my headware so it wasn't actually a lie. "But I don't think it applies here. Dante was talking about money, in a time of limited resources – artificially limited, if you're talking about money, but in his day, most resources were limited. Even knowledge, before the printing press -"

"They sure as Hell weren't unlimited when civilization collapsed here – not drinkable water and arable land, or even energy in some places! And isn't this technology being artificially limited?"

Mal sighed. "We haven't found any other humans who could or would use it: even if they haven't turned luddite out of superstition, they're nomadic and won't bother with anything they can't carry. None of them had anything much more sophisticated than a solar oven. I'm not saying that Matthew couldn't have done more to help more people, but just surviving as long as he has was a real accomplishment in itself."

"Just because he's probably the oldest human on the planet doesn't mean he's the best candidate for deciding how it will be remembered!"

I stretched out on the bed, exhausted by the gravity. "What's your problem with him?"

"I just don't trust him," Gus admitted. "He's too quiet, and he tries too hard to seem helpful. He looks as though he hasn't been outside in a century, and his body language... it's just wrong, he seems like some sort of creature guarding his hoard. And you heard him talk about family traditions. I think he's set up some sort of hereditary fiefdom here."

"It would hardly be the first we've found," Mal muttered, but I could tell Gus had scored a point. The whole idea of inherited property or titles was a luxury that both we and the Martians had discarded as too costly, to the degree of firmly discouraging children from following the same profession as their parents.

"I think he's okay," said Sally, unexpectedly. "He let us in, didn't he, without trying to disarm us?"

"He might not have thought he had a choice," said Gus. "I just wish we'd thought to ask Nina if there were any other men here. I haven't seen any sign of any. Maybe those women are his harem, or his daughters – or both."

No-one spoke for a few seconds. Even the most barbaric communities we'd encountered had forbidden parent-child incest: like cannibalism and bestiality, it was something they denied ever practicing, though many attributed it to their neighbours.

"We're not here to judge," said Mal.

"Actually, we are," said Gus. "Project Afterlife is meant to tell us what went wrong, and to help us rebuild societies here – and not based on only one man's ideas, or those of his ancestors."

* * *

The dining hall was spacious enough to seat 200, with a high ceiling that reminded me of some ancient cathedral – though with polarized skylights rather than Michelangelo artwork. The furniture was even more spartan than in the other rooms we'd seen, and the knives had been worn down by decades of sharpening, though everything else was in remarkably good condition. I surreptitiously scanned the food for toxins and other contaminants, and the scans came back clear, though unfortunately that didn't prepare me for the taste. There were twenty-two people gathered there when we arrived, and a few more visible in the kitchen. Apart from Matthew, the only males were four pre-adolescent boys – none of whom, I noticed, closely resembled Matthew, or each

other. I watched them as unobtrusively as I could: the light wasn't quite good enough for me to make out the colours of everyone's eyes, but I was able to make a good stab at matching them with their mothers, and their sisters, making a tentative effort to map out the genetic drift as best I could based just on appearance. After a few moments, I found myself paying attention to details of behaviour, trying to see whether the clothing or the seating arrangements or anything else gave any hints as to any sort of hierarchy that wasn't clearly age-based – and then Sally turned to the slender young woman next to her and asked, without preamble, “Where are all the men?”

The lump of whatever I was trying to eat made a valiant escape attempt, and I coughed so loudly that I missed the first part of her answer, but she ended with “- hunting.”

I looked at the food suspiciously, and decided I didn't want to know. “Women don't hunt?” asked Sally.

“Some do,” came the reply, “but there's nothing left near here, the hunting parties have to travel a long way, set up camps, find water sources... they can be gone for months, and only come back when they have something worth bringing home.”

“If at all,” said a grandmotherly-looking woman on the other side of the table.

“It's dangerous out there, even in the camps.”

“So you're free to leave?” asked Mal, before Gus could speak.

“Why? We're better off where we are,” said the older woman. “There's plenty to do here, even without the men. Oh, sometimes young people say they want to start new societies of their own with new rules, and we give them as much food and water as they can carry and whatever else we can spare, but either they realize how precious what we have here really is and come home like Cho here, or we never hear from them again.”

Cho looked down into her bowl, which struck me as a foolishly brave action, then at Sally. “Isn't that what you did? All of you?”

“I suppose so,” said Gus, blandly. “What sort of new rules?”

Cho shrugged. “We never really got that far,” she admitted. “It's just that this place can seem really small when you have to share it with your family, and it's quiet, there's not much to do when you've finished work...”

“Who makes the rules here?” Gus pressed.

Cho looked blank, and the older woman shrugged. “There aren't that many rules,” she said. “Do no harm, and help who you can if they ask, but otherwise leave them in peace. Preserve what's good and useful. Return what you borrow. Do your duty and others will do theirs. Learn.” She took a mouthful of food, and chewed it. “I was taught all of those when I first came here. There are disputes, sometimes, but they get resolved at meetings, or people leave.”

I looked at her more closely, noticed the cruciform scar on her forehead. It seemed too symmetrical to have been accidental. “You weren't born here?”

“No. My parents were nomads from up north; they saw this place, and Matthew gave them food and water, asked them if they wanted to stay. I was probably four or five. My mother died not long after that, and my father left, but my sister and I said we wanted to stay. My father and my brother wanted to take Binda with them, but the people here said she didn't have to go if she didn't want to... so she stayed until she died,” she finished sadly, “and I never saw my father or brother again.”

“We've heard that Matthew is trying to preserve the family traditions, keeping up their work,” said Gus, after a respectful pause. “What did his parents call

themselves? Did they have any sort of title?”

“Title?”

“Or rank. Major? Abbott? Baron? Governor? Anything like that?”

The woman blinked, then smiled. “Oh, that sort of title: I thought you meant... never mind. Yes, and Matthew said it was one of the most noble titles anyone could have. We call him by it sometimes, though he says he doesn’t really deserve it...”

“What is it?”

“Librarian.”

The three of us stared at her for a moment. Mal was the first of us to start laughing, as much at Gus’s expression as anything else – and a few seconds later, Gus finally joined in.

* * *

“It’s not much, compared to what was lost,” Matthew said apologetically, as he opened the library door. “The hunting parties recovered what they could, but much of it was in pretty bad condition by that time. And some of the people stationed here before the collapse had a few books and magazines, but not many: mostly, they read from screens. When it looked as though the net might be lost, my parents uploaded and saved what they could, in as many different forms as they could manage. They even did their best to make more paper and ink, in case something happened to the computer or people forgot how to use one. Of course, I’ve done my best to prevent that happening – and to make sure someone could still read English and as many of the other languages as possible. I’d hate to think of all of this being wasted.”

“It won’t be wasted,” I promised, softly. “We won’t even need to take any of it; we can copy it all, restore some of what’s damaged... maybe even learn enough about the world before the collapse to understand why it happened.” I told him about Project Afterlife as succinctly as I could, while the others stared at the wonderful hoard of books, magazines, and other media, searching for the subjects that most interested them. Mal found something called Key Contemporary Buildings, and was almost in tears. Sally was looking at accounts of the last days of the war in some of the last magazines printed before the collapse. And Gus reverently - and carefully - picked up a fat paperback, and leafed through it. “By Providence divine,” he quoted, “Some food we had, and some fresh water...” He read a few more lines before choking up, and Matthew finished the speech for him.

“... linens, stuffs, and necessaries, Which since have steeled much; so, of his gentleness, Knowing I loved my books, he furnish’d me, From my own library, with volumes that I prize above my dukedom.” He sat down on a folding chair, obviously nearly as tired as he was happy, then chuckled. “Afterlife. You know, many of the people who fought the last war did it in the hope of an afterlife. I wonder if they found it.” He shrugged. “Let me know if you have any questions.” “I have one,” said Sally, holding up a copy of Time showing an old man in a mitre, standing on a balcony. “Why did bears wear these funny hats?”

Questions for Reflection

- I. Does anything matter more than survival - and if so, what, and why?
- II. If we had to make a choice, what should we save: human lives, or human thought (genes or memes)?
- III. Can we make an afterlife in the form of a virtual reality? Should we?