

## FIRE AND ICE

It was a warm afternoon; there was no rush to get back home. I took out my book of Robert Frost's poems, 'Miscellaneous Poems to 1920', and chanced upon 'Fire and Ice':

“Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To know that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice. “

Frost, I thought to myself, is a master at making simple words say profound things. Presumably he's not so much concerned with the end of the world – a far remote event – but maybe the destructive powers of desire and hate. Yes, I thought, the poem is presenting contradictory images: fire ~ ice, desire ~ hate, maybe also life – death – I wonder.

As I was musing on these things I suddenly became aware of someone next to me on the bench. “Ah,” said my companion, “my world ended in both fire *and* ice.”

“What?” I said, a little startled.

“My world ended in both fire and ice,” he repeated.

“Sorry,” I said, “I don't understand. Are you saying that your life was shattered by some horrible incident involving fire and ice?”

“You could put it that way, I suppose,” he said. “But I don't think my life was shattered. I'm here now and I'm alive. It was my world, the planet I lived on, that was ended. It's gone. At least is still out there orbiting its sun in some far distant galaxy; but it's cold and lifeless now.”

‘Oh dear,’ I thought to myself, ‘am I dreaming? Is this really happening?’ But all I could reply was “Oh?”

My companion obviously took this as an invitation to continue, and he began telling me about his planet: its seas and continents; its plants and animals; its countries and cities. If what he was saying had any truth, it would appear that his peoples were more technologically advanced than we are on earth.

He then started telling me about himself – his childhood, his family and his friends. I interrupted him at this point.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “How come you're speaking to me in English? You're not trying to tell me that somewhere in this universe there was another inhabited planet where the people – or at least some of the people – just happened to speak a language identical with English.”

“Of course not,” he replied. “Our language was very different. I had to learn English after I arrived here. It wasn't easy, but I stuck to it – listening hard to people's conversations and trying to read notices and newspapers. My word, what a confusing writing system you have!”

"I know," I said. "But, what's this about arriving here? In a spaceship, I suppose," I said, rather mockingly. "It's funny but I don't recall ever hearing in the news about any spaceship arriving."

"That," he replied patiently, "is because no spaceship ever arrived. I suppose you've heard of 'time and relative dimension in space.'?"

"Oh," I said, laughing. "A TARDIS! You came to earth in a old-style police box! Um," I continued, "that's been thought of before, you know. Or are you going to tell me *you're* Dr Who!"

"Oh dear," sighed my companion. "No, I am not Dr Who, Yes, I've heard of him; but he is merely a fictitious character; and his TARDIS – well, it's very amusing, but not exactly convincing."

"OK," I said. "So what is *your* TARDIS like?"

"You can't see it," he said. "We used an empty room in an office-block as our portal into your planet. Our machine – for there were more than just me who travelled here – our machine is co-dimensional with the room."

"Oh," I said, still laughing, "you got beamed down, like they beam down people on Star Trek, and then you just walked out of the empty room among other the offices without anyone noticing! Not very likely, is it?"

"Ah", he replied calmly. "You cannot be too familiar with large cities. You will be surprised just what people do *not* notice there. And as for 'beaming down', as you put it – no, it's not like on Star Trek. Let me explain. You can handle the mathematics of quantum physics, I assume."

"No, sorry, – let's get back to your story before I interrupted it. I think you said your world ended in both fire and ice."

"Ah yes," he said, "that's right."

Then he began telling me about a large nature reserve in the continent of Melop. "It was," he said, "famous for its for its geothermal features such as geysers, hot springs and sulphur vents. In fact the main part of it was a gigantic caldera some 80 by 60 kilometres, formed by a massive volcanic eruption some 600 000 years before. According to our geologists it had been known to have erupted four times in the past two and a half million years and would certainly erupt again one day. But our geologists assured us that it was being well monitored and that there was currently no danger."

"Um," I grunted. "Sounds an awful lot like Yellowstone National Park in America."

"There are certainly similarities," he agreed. "But the details are not the same, as I'm sure you noticed. Anyway, there was a full-scale eruption of *our* caldera; this caused, of course, millions of deaths locally just as you would get here, in fact, if the Yellowstone caldera erupted. But what was in many ways worse was the effect of the vast amount of laval flow and pyroclastic material spewed out bt the eruption. The laval flows and the heavier pyroclastic material, falling to earth, set off innumerable fires; there were several forest fires and many cities were destroyed by fires that simply got out of control. All the ash and soot from these fires as well as the lighter pyroclastic material from the caldera eruption were carried up into our stratosphere and spread around the planet by winds, so that within a few weeks a uniform belt of particles encircled our globe, blocking out our sun's light and causing surface temperatures to drop drastically.

"This belt of particulate matter remained for years, shutting out sunlight and heat. Without sunlight, vegetation perished and consequently animals, including humans, perished also. The temperature continued falling; ice covered everything and the planet became too cold to sustain life. So you see, our world ended in fire *and* ice."

"Yes, I see that," I said, "But if your planet became too cold to sustain life, how is it you are here?"

"Yes," he said. "Life became very tough. I and my colleagues had been working on the the development of time and relative dimension in space machines before the 'Great Tribulation', as it was called, afflicted our planet. The technology was still in its infancy; but faced with certain extinction if we stayed, we worked, under extremely difficult conditions, to create a machine that could take the surviving members of our team. Twelve of us remained and simply took a chance that we would find a suitable planet somewhere before our meagre supplies had run out.

"Fortunately many years before our astronomers had made informed guesses where likely inhabitable planets might be found in the different galaxies, so we were not travelling entirely blind. But all the same we were very fortunate to find your Earth as soon as we did, as there are vast distances between your galaxy and our former one."

"Yes, very fortunate," I said in not too convincing a tone. "So the twelve of you are living around here, and no one's noticed?"

"Oh no," he replied. "we decided we would have a much better chance of survival if we dispersed and each mixed in separately with the native population as soon as possible. We all keep in touch, of course, but we are widely dispersed. "

By this time I was getting a little tired by the obviously fictitious tale of my over-imaginative neighbour. "it's all very interesting," I said, "and I'm glad you survived, but I really must be getting on."

With that I shut the book of Robert Frost's poems and made ready to move away.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said my companion. "I see I've detained you. I'd must go. I will maybe see you again sometime."

With that he took out what I assumed was his mobile phone, tapped in a few numbers and vanished.

I pinched myself once or twice. Had my companion topped his fantastic story with some elaborate conjuring trick? Had I dozed off in the afternoon sun? Surely it could not be that my companion's story had actually been true?

As I slowly walked home, Robert Frost's words 'Some say the world will end in fire, Some say in ice' kept going round in my mind: I wonder, I thought to myself, I wonder.