

Zak's Memorable Encounter

It was a warm afternoon; there was no rush to get back home. Zak took out his book of Robert Frost's poems, 'Miscellaneous Poems to 1920', and chanced upon 'Fire and Ice.' He had hardly read past "*Some say the world will end in fire./ Some say in ice./ From what ...*" when he was interrupted by someone on the bench next to him.

"Ah," said his companion, "my world ended in both fire and ice."

"What?" Zak said, a little startled.

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

"Sorry," Zak 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 it wasn't my life; it was my *world*, the planet I lived on, that was ended. It's gone. At least it is still out there orbiting its sun in some far distant galaxy; but it's cold and lifeless now."

'Oh dear,' Zak thought to himself, 'is this guy bonkers?' But all he could reply was "Oh?"

His companion obviously took this as an invitation to continue, and began telling Zak 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 began to tell Zak about himself: his childhood, his family and his friends. At this point Zak interrupted him.

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

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

"Oh," Zak said, laughing, "a TARDIS! You came to earth in a old-style police box! That's been thought of before, you know. Are you going to tell me you're Dr Who!"

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

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

"You can't see it," his companion replied. "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," Zak said, still laughing, "you got beamed down like in Star Trek, and then you just walked out of the empty room among other offices without anyone noticing! Not very likely, is it?"

"Ah", his companion replied calmly. "You're obviously not familiar with large cities. You will be

surprised just what people do *not* notice there. And as for ‘beaming down’ - no, it’s not like on Star Trek. Let me explain. You have some knowledge of quantum physics, I assume, and some understanding of space-time fabric and wormholes and so forth.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Zak replied hurriedly but untruthfully, “but 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 Zak that in the continent of Melop there had been a large nature reserve, famous for its geothermal features such as geysers, hot springs and sulphur vents. The main part of it, he explained, was a gigantic caldera some 80 by 60 kilometres, formed by a massive volcanic eruption some 600 000 years before.

“According to our geologists,” he said. “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 they assured us that it was being well monitored and that there was currently no danger.”

“Um,” Zak grunted. “Sounds an awful lot like Yellowstone National Park in America.”

“There are certainly similarities,” his companion 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 if the Yellowstone caldera erupted. But what was in many ways worse were the vast flows of lava and the pyroclastic material spewed out by the eruption. The lava 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. 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,” Zak said, “But if your planet became too cold to sustain life, how is it you are here?”

“Yes,” his companion 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 disaster 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 twelve members of our team and simply took a chance that we would find a suitable planet somewhere before our supplies had run out. Fortunately many years earlier 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,” Zak said in not too convincing a tone. “So the twelve of you are living around here, and no one’s noticed?”

“Oh no,” his companion replied. “we decided we would have a much better chance if we dispersed and each mixed separately with the local population as soon as possible. We all keep in touch, of course; but I fear I have detained you too long. I must go.”

With that his companion left him, leaving Zak wondering: ‘Surely it could not be that that guy’s story is actually true?’

Nevertheless Zak could not get this encounter out of his mind. Although he remained skeptical

about the story, he could not stop wondering about the fate of our planet. ‘The Yellowstone caldera may erupt one day,’ he thought, ‘but the pathetic responses of world leaders to the warnings of scientists over the past half century or more about the dangers of global warming are much more alarming. Climate change is already happening. Human stupidity and greed are more likely to cause our planet’s destruction!’

His companion’s words “You have some knowledge of quantum physics, I assume, and some understanding of space-time fabric and wormholes and so forth” had lit a spark. ‘Time and relative dimension in space research is sorely needed,’ he thought.

As a result of this memorable encounter, Zak worked hard at mathematics and physics; one day he was to become a renowned physicist, specializing in the mysterious worlds of both relativity and quantum physics – but that is another story.