

A Sickness of the Soul

There was another round of applause as Satish Vidal walked back up to the speaker's podium. It was not as thunderous as when he had received his award earlier in the evening, but that did not stop him blushing again. As the clapping died away, the doctor took a deep breath in an effort to calm his voice.

"Thank you again," he began, a slight quiver still evident. "I was saying to Roger earlier that the requirement to give a speech once one has won the award must be done deliberately to humble the recipient still further." There were a few laughs and smiles in the audience. "Not only do I have the pressure of standing up in front of you all, but I have to do it after such an enjoyable meal." There were more sounds of laughter.

"This evening I thought I would recount my version of that now infamous incident which took place some fifty or so years ago. It was much publicised at the time, as I am sure you all remember, but once nothing new came of the case the media lost interest and only the most dedicated of you would have been able to track down anything more than the cursory details that were published. The outcome, I am sure, you all still remember, but there are a certain bits that were known only to a few of us which I have never spoken about before.

"It was an incident that humbled me, and brought home to me how little, even after all these millennia, we truly know about how the human body works. I am sure you all remember how it began: a man with a cough and a runny nose.

The man, Francisco Gorin, had recently returned to Earth orbit after an extensive cruise around many of the known systems, even touching on some of the more recently settled planets. He was a man of means, having inherited the wealth his family had built up over many centuries of mining exploration, and he had travelled in luxury wherever possible.

His medical condition had baffled both his own med' unit and the clinic he had been referred on to. They had carried out all of the usual tests, both for foreign bodies he had picked up on his travels and for errant gene splicing. Nothing had shown up. He was, or at least had been, a healthy human specimen. There were the usual augmentations and tweaks we all expect to find when studying anyone from the higher classes, but nothing out of the ordinary. He had never undergone any kind of adaptation techniques and had spent his entire life in the same human form. Even gender changes and self fertilization had been avoided. There was, as all the checks at the clinic had shown, nothing wrong with him, nor anything that should have gone wrong with him. And yet he had, what can only be described as, a cold.

The referral came to me from Earth Central, who were looking for someone with a research background in XT diseases. I would like to say that I intended to approach the case with an open mind, but the symptoms and the failure to find any evidence of what had caused them, led me to presume there had been some error along the way. There had been enough humans involved in the case already that it was perfectly possible they had confused themselves, although three higher AI had also taken an interest and they too had failed to turn up anything. Still, mistakes do happen

even with the cloud minds so I expected to do nothing more than check through the data and find out what they had missed. Hubris can catch us all unawares.

You can imagine my frustration, when, after a few hours of reading through the notes from the clinic, I had failed to uncover anything more. Annoyed at myself as much as anything, I requested a meeting with the patient and an opportunity to run some diagnostics of my own. FG agreed without hesitation and we were able to link up almost immediately.

I took another data capture from his internal systems and when nothing jumped out at me I started talking to him about his own ideas as to why he had fallen ill. He told me that he had returned from his travels two days ago. He had not been ill on the return leg of his trip, nor had he suffered any sort of mishap while he was any from Earth. It was only on the first evening after returning home that he had started to get any symptoms.

The cough had been the first sign that something was wrong. He remembered the initial feeling as just a need to clear his throat, but over the course of a few hours he had begun coughing on a regular basis. His internal system had failed to find either a reason for this or been able to stop it and he began to think that his body was at fault in some way. He put the matter out of his mind, as much as a man with a cough can I suppose, and decided he would get a full core replacement done the next day. The following morning the cough had not vanished, but had actually grown worse and all the checks that were run on his systems failed to turn up any errors. His body was working as it should, it was just unable to deal with the cough. FG was frustrated and to make his situation worse he had now started to suffer from a runny nose.

Medical scans were instigated and by the end of the second day, when no cause for his ailments could be found, he was quarantined in the local clinic (where I had my first conversation with him).

I must admit that I was still puzzled at this stage as to what line of enquiry I should pursue, so I resorted to checking all the data I had not initially looked through. I then decided (if I am honest I was out of ideas) to ask FG more about his travels rather than just look at his records.

The trip had begun one hundred and fifty static years earlier. He wanted, he said, to find something more to life. Earth had become tiresome for him. The majority of his friends had left for other systems. He had no urge to work and a trip through The Cloud did not seem to offer him anything either. Of all his friends who had moved away from Earth he only kept in touch with two of them, most of the others had gone through adaptation of some sort and they had drifted apart. It transpired that the two who he still considered friends were also rarely in contact with him. He said to me, while describing his reasons for travelling, that it seemed like the world had moved on and he had been left behind.

The route he planned was very extensive. He started off with a zigzag tour of the inner worlds, taking in all the normal tourist traps. Then he began spiking out to the old rim worlds. In each case he spent years on planets, not only taking in the sights but actually getting involved in what was on offer. For him this was more than a tour, it was a chance to get immersed in a life he felt he had missed out on.

“I wanted to find not only what was out there,” he told me, “but also what was in here; in me.”

Perhaps it would be best to call it a voyage of discovery.

I spent time talking to him in some detail about each place he had visited, and by the end of that day I had learned more about his life than I thought I would ever want to know about anyone. After six hours of talking he asked if we could take a break, he had started to get a headache he told me. Before we parted company I checked over his readings again and it appeared that his skin temperature had risen well above the norm. More worryingly his internal temperature had also increased by a degree.

FG had decided to get some sleep, as he said he felt exhausted. I was not surprised given the ailments he was now suffering from. While he slept he gave me access to his internals and I started running diagnostics on the reasons for his rise in body temperature. It appeared that no matter what his body did, no matter what was secreted, the changes were minimal. His temperature, for example, would drop down by a few degrees only to return to its escalated level minutes later. It was as if his body was fighting itself, or, to be more precise, as if his original human biology was overriding all his support systems.

This had become both the most interesting and frustrating medical problem I had been presented with in over five hundred years of practice and I found it difficult to sleep with so much information to take in. In the early hours of the morning, just as I had finally decided to get some rest, an alert came through from the clinic. Not only had FG's temperature continued to rise, but he was now suffering from sickness and diarrhoea.

A medical team had already been alerted and were tending to him, but as with all the other problems he was experiencing there was little they could do. I decided, on a whim, that I would take a hop over to where he was quarantined. I could not think of anything more that such a visit would add, but it seemed worth the effort.

By the time I reached the medical unit a number of The Cloud had also manifested: obviously FG's situation had created more than just a passing interest with them. The patient had been put into a comma to prevent any further anguish while we discussed what could be done. Bodily fluids had ceased to be expelled, but there now appeared to be evidence of trauma to his organs, and it was only minutes later that the first signs of internal bleeding were registered.

Cell patching was instigated in an attempt to stem the flow of blood, but the bleeding was not isolated to just one place; it was breaking out in all his organs. Every part of his body was falling apart and there was little any of us could do to stop it.

As we continued to discuss what few theories we had it became evident that we were not going to be able to save his body. It was a rather humbling moment to be in the company of so many higher minds and for none of us to have any way of helping this man. One of the AIs even went as far as to offer to uplift him, should he so wish. There was little else for the poor soul and it was decided that we should revive him long enough to ask if he had any last wishes.

A large influx of stabilisers were used to hold off the worst of the effects for a few minutes and allow us to bring him back to consciousness. As he was still in isolation and because we thought his

systems were under too much stress to take any sort of normal direct communication, we used a dumb terminal to enable the conversation.

Talking was clearly difficult for FG and so we kept things to simple questions. He rejected the idea of being uplifted, although offered his thanks to the AI for such generosity, and he stated that he had no further requests. In the end (his voice breaking up under the strain) he simply said, "I have seen all there is and have found myself still empty. May Heaven take my soul."

We let him fall unconscious again. Within minutes he was pronounced dead.