

A PERFECT WORLD

by Christopher Cussat

Tauren gazed up into the hazy sky. The sun struggled to penetrate the early morning grey with no avail. Only a dim hint of yellow was filtered through the atmosphere. After the Great War, the sun could no longer distinguish the day from the night. Now, dense blackness permeated the evenings, while the afternoons basked in a dusk-like hue. A blanket of pollutants darkened the planet as a scarred reminder of people's desire to destroy. The world was in ruins. Oceans boiled with acidic potency and the ground still smoldered in some places from the bombs' intense radiation.

Tauren strained his eyes out toward the faint horizon and mentally sifted through the miles of rubble that stretched before him. Houses were but broken walls, beneath which, families also lay broken. Streets leading nowhere barely separated the piles of debris which were once cities and towns.

A warm wind brushed Tauren's face, gently nudging him from his dreamy trance. As he inhaled, each breath burned in his lungs. The foreign particles trapped in the air aggravated his mouth and nostrils. He knew he must soon return below to his shelter. The oxygen in the air remained pure for only a few minutes each day. Tauren could only inhale without filters during the beginning moments of twilight. As the day progressed, the afternoon breezes swept loose fallout off the ground, mutating the wind into a saturated and poisonous gas.

With a strained grunt, Tauren lifted the thick hatch that secured his laboratory. He entered feet first onto a simple ladder which led down to a small elevation platform that supported his weight while he locked himself in. A small green button before him activated the lift and he quickly descended nearly a half-mile in mere seconds.

Upon reaching the lower level, Tauren stepped off and sealed another, even thicker, airlock. This action automatically engaged the compressor that produced and filtered pure oxygen.

The outer perimeter of the hallway had been overgrown with many variations of green, breathing plants. They were remnants of his early bio-engineering research of so many years ago and the reason why he built his laboratory so far underground. He initially needed a pure and isolated environment in order for his experiments to function properly.

"Seven years," Tauren thought as he ducked past an overhanging Gigantus fern. For seven years he had been the sole survivor of the thermonuclear war. For seven years he had repeated the daily routine of going up to the surface, taking a few breaths, and returning back down to his sanction. For seven long years he lived totally alone.

Tauren often wondered why he had survived the holocaust. He inferred that the deeply remote location of his laboratory had possibly saved him. Or perhaps, he often pondered, this was a living penance for some sin he had committed.

"Optimum oxygen level attained," a shrill voice broke the usual silence. It continued, "Exterior and interior hatch-locks secure." "Habitation system analysis complete." "Please direct further inquiries specifically to input unit." The mechanical monotone of the computer did not provide much comfort to Tauren, but he was thankful for its cold presence. The computer's voice had become a companion and its dry, reiteration of the environmental safety check welcomed him home from his brief pilgrimage each day. Although completely alone in his world, Tauren still had a friend.

"Computer," Tauren interrogated, "tell me again how it came about that I am the only survivor of the Great War." A brief moment of

silence again overtook the room, which was soon followed by a whirring and clicking buzz that seemed to last much longer than it really did. Finally, the voice interjected, "The last broadcast from Central Command reported fatalities at 88.7 percent of world population as a direct result of the first strike impact." The machine continued, "This system estimates that subsequent impacts from second and third launches increased casualty total to 96.2 percent dead or critical. With radiation and fallout levels later superseding the outer atmosphere by 47.5 parts, survival rate for planet's occupants is estimated at .00473 percent." "It is this system's theoretical conclusion that you should be deceased."

Tauren expected the computer's answer, for it was always the same. Still, he hoped that someday a different response would convince him that there was a reason why he lived.

The Podatic clinging ivy had gradually crawled up the far wall and attached itself to a support beam that ran the length of the ceiling. Tauren glanced at the plant's progress momentarily and began to reminisce. He had not solely studied plant life during his scientific career. More recently, his interest in biological entities focused his attention toward the stars. Tauren, although ridiculed by many of his late colleagues, was convinced that some form of intelligent life had to exist elsewhere in the universe. Most of his research before the war had been done in the field of outer space transmissions. Tauren had designed a new type of communication system that incorporated the use of binary radio signals encoded and reinforced by a tangible, infrared light source. He strongly believed that his complicated "radio-light telescope" would contact alien life forms if they existed.

Tauren initiated his transmissions approximately five years before the war began and for seven years following the devastation, he continued to send out his signals. To a simpler world's technology, the signals reaching the farthest ends of the galaxy would only be picked up

by wave receptors as random static patterns. But, for a highly advanced race, these patterns could be detected and interpreted as consistent, intentional codes and then traced back to their place of origin. Tauren believed that this was his only hope of being found and rescued. It was an extreme chance, but it was his only one.

After the Great War, Tauren had survived by eating the non-contaminated, sealed food that was scattered around demolished stores and warehouses. The computer was able to measure pollutant levels to determine what food was edible.

Tauren, with the aid of the computer, had projected that his food supply would last ten years. But they both underestimated the radiation's potency, and as a result, Tauren's supplies were nearly expended. His last hope of survival was the aliens, who may not even exist.

So he waited. For seven years he had been waiting. His food reminded him that his hypothesis had to be a reality. He sat by the computer's output module every night and waited for any detection or inconsistency in the atmosphere.

Tauren envisioned a new world, a perfect world that the aliens would fly him to in some sleek, sub-spaceship or saucer. He thought about how advanced that world would be. In order for them to actually locate his signal and find him, their technology would have to greatly surpass his. He imagined a world where knowledge was not utilized to make bombs and missiles designed to kill and destroy everything. Tauren's perfect world would not annihilate with senseless brutality. No, his new world saved lives and its people cared about one another. Tauren was eager to see his next home.

"Sensors detect atmospheric penetration over north by northeastern sector of stratosphere," the computer interrupted his fantasy. Tauren immediately realized that the north by northeast sector was directly above his laboratory. "Computer," Tauren demanded excitedly, "identify the source of penetration." The ma-

chine responded in a melody of hums and clicks, "Based on this system's current data, the source of atmospheric penetration is unidentifiable." If the object was a meteor or a comet, the computer would surely have been able to identify it. Tauren felt in his heart that this mysterious object was indeed the answer to his prayers.

Tauren hastily grabbed a portable air filtering unit, placed the rubbery nozzle in his mouth, and dashed toward the elevation platform. When he reached the surface, he unlocked the hatch and was immediately blinded by a scorching light. His sensitive eyes watered profusely as he raised his hand to shield them. Through the sweltering blast, he discerned the slim shape of a rocket-type ship touching down a few hundred yards away. The vehicle's great fire-tail extinguished itself on the ground's irradiated soil, throwing much dust as it landed.

After most of the resulting heat subsided, Tauren wildly ran toward the silver tower with every possible expectation. When he closed in upon the ship, a rectangular door opened and two forms emerged. They wore what appeared to be bulky, golden spacesuits with large, ovular helmets. One of the creatures pointed at Tauren and they both began to move toward him. Tauren hesitated at first, but he then placed his fears aside and walked to the beings with absolute certainty.

As Tauren approached them, he noticed how different they were from him. The aliens were quite taller than Tauren, making him feel like a child before them. Through their visors, he could even distinguish their facial features. Oddly, one of the creature's skin was pale, while the other one stared back with a darker complexion. "Their eyes though," thought Tauren, "reflect much compassion." It was clear that they had come to save him.

The pale one began to talk through a speaker in its helmet, but Tauren could not understand their bizarre language. Then the two aliens briefly engaged in discussion, after which, the darker one bent toward the ground and out-

lined a sphere in the dirt with one of its fingers. As it pointed to the drawn circle, it repeated the same strange word over and over again.

Tauren now understood what they were trying to tell him. So that was the name of his perfect world. This place will be his new planet, free of loneliness and destructive hatred. The aliens were about to take him past the stars to a peaceful, kind and perfect world. Tauren reached out his fluorescent blue hand in a gesture of thanks. The two creatures took turns shaking it in acknowledgement. Tauren could not wait to gather his few possessions and travel to his new and wonderful home. "Oh yes," he strained to remember, "how did they say it?" "Earth."

Erika Montano EL DUELO

The pain of losing someone
is
the worst pain there can be
like
the sand
washed away
into
the sea.

Antonio Mendoza MEMORIES

Your breath my soul
con su sabeza
vamos a cantar
los recuerdos racing bike
my memories
of grandfather's mistake



ALBERT WAUGH