

The Last Story

by Finnegan Flawnt

The serious writer always knew there would be a last story but when the time was near, he felt ill-prepared.

One day, after settling in his favourite chair by the window but turned away from it, he told a visiting friend: "It's well arranged that you don't know which of the many will be your last: your last piss, your last time being touched by someone, the last warm cup of coffee in the morning. The last chat with a friend. The last supper. You enjoy all of these in the most present of tenses, carried by the hope that there may be another one, and then another and so on. And since we are an ingeniously lazy and trusting species, we take the routine to be a principle and we shrink it on the occasion of its repeated occurrence without further thought."

The friend lit a pipe and said: "I think I see where you're coming from. I understand death is on your mind."

The serious writer shifted his weight in his chair and looked at the pipe with longing. Having stopped smoking years ago, he now afforded himself only the second hand experience. He made a mental note regarding the loss of certain pleasures over time.

"The older I get", he said, "the less I appreciate the fact that one of my stories will come round and not leave, (like a hot beverage going entropically from scorching to lukewarm to cold), and then what? Become an epitaph?" He chuckled.

"You know that Koschinsky has begun to write your obituary already, I hear. That's outstanding", his friend said and found himself obliged to clarify: "Given Koschinsky's reputation as a critic these days, of course."

“I have not only heard it, I suggested it to Koschinsky”, said the serious writer. “I thought: why not take the initiative in final affairs while I can?” He crossed his legs, laid one hand on top of the other, rubbing them so as to feel the knobby bits.

“I have recently disregarded my bodily needs terribly. Come to think of it, I also have not listened to my inner voice lately. I don't know why. Perhaps because otherwise I won't write that last story — I'm afraid to leave an unfinished opus behind, you know?”, he said and his friend nodded, churning out blueish clouds.

The serious writer said lightly, “I have always been a great fan of the auto-da-fé as a way of maintaining a certain degree of control beyond the grave while at the same time keeping your fans giddy and guessing until Judgement Day: ‘Did he or did he not...?’, ‘What if he had...?’, ‘Could this have been...?’, ‘We wonder if he...’, and so on — it keeps me young I think. But the difficulty with burning your stuff in reference to the possibility of your death is two-fold: you don't know if you're wasting your time because you might be alive for another X years; and it makes you think of your own death”.

“It would be a terrible crime to do that. I don't think your readers or your critics could ever forgive you after your death,” said his friend. He didn't seem to notice his own tactlessness.

“Well”, said the serious writer, serious again, “as you know, I abhor both waste and thoughts of death. Hence I only carry the idea of an auto-da-fé around with me, together with a small canister of gasoline and a matchbox. Rather like the plan for a certain prayer and a rosary, which I never touch. I don't know if I fantasise that I might burn not only my work but myself, but I am certainly stocked up just in case.”

The friend shook his head gently, trying to disperse the thought, and waved his hands, or so it seemed to the writer, because the fumes

had become so thick now that he was separated from his visitor by a grey wall of smoke. He went on voicing his thoughts aloud, as was his habit even when he was alone.

“The stories I will write before that last one will be as prayerful as anything I have ever penned: the characters will be mild and philosophical, apt to hold life's whole in appropriate balance, with an even demeanour gracing my own age, like a study of butterflies at the end of their long, arduous journey. These not quite last stories shall, I think, test my very existence by throwing up many questions that had plagued me for a lifetime of serious writing, like the question of whether we determine our fate or are determined by it.”

He heard his friend mumble something across from him and took it as approval to continue.

“One of these stories will be about a man who sat across me once on an underground train: his right arm hung limply as if he'd had a stroke and he looked at me open-eyed and yet guarding his self behind his condition. He had to lurch forward three times (as if performing a secret ritual) in order to shift his centre of mass and get up at all, ignoring me throughout this maneuver and finally smiling — unless it was not a smile but a strained grimace. I wonder: did this man feel that he chose his partial paralysis by making a silent wish between clenched teeth, or by dreaming it in advance? Perhaps he felt that he'd been dealt a bad card, not quite the last one, by some god not merciful, overlooking him, with respect only for the fabric of everything but not this particular man's happiness?”

The serious writer realised in that moment how the word 'happiness' betrayed its own meaning, because in reality it boiled down to mundane things like chicken soup, which he then dressed up as something less plain than farts and farewells. But he was not ready to interrupt himself quite yet and continued:

“Or is this man, let us call him Max (a good, solid, reliable name for this type) like me, refusing to take sides on this question of questions, perhaps, again like me, writing for his passage between the Scylla of providence and the Charybdis of randomness? A passage not to anywhere, a time filler, an artful avoidance?”

“You tell me, my friend,” he invited the other. There was no answer, only the sound of the floor boards creaking.

“Here's another question that bothers me — no less than the first: how much of us is unique and how much part of a grand collective of souls? When we breathe in and out, do we choose our own rhythm or do we enact an unconscious concert? Do we only imagine that we create our own thoughts but actually just sculpt an identity out of one and the same shared material? Is our whole concept of individuality just nonsense?”

He broke off because he felt exhausted all of a sudden. His ideas, his questions all seemed unclear and somehow impure to him. As if there was a truth behind the words, but the more words he piled upon one another, the less visible was this truth. He put his hands over his face and felt their soft insides now on his temples and the bones around his eye socket. On his cheeks, the palms pressed down on his the beard. He felt himself.

“What a powerful illusion the self is, especially for me, with my oeuvre, my life's work, which I, in the hubris of the great individualist who also happens to be a snob (a most convenient combination against the power of the collective) trace back to myself: me, me again, me also, me-me, meee — these are only some of the variations on the person at the centre of my consciousness, who is really just a persona and does not contain my soul, though the fingerprints of my soul are certainly all over it.”

He felt himself to be alone. Sometimes, for some people, the Me broke down almost completely, very close to disappearing without dying altogether, he thought and closed his eyes.

He wanted to write another story in this one-of-the-last-stories category about a man, always only called 'the patient', who emerged from a car accident as a vegetable, his brain shut down until, after five long years, he suddenly began to respond to questions again and finally awoke, but as a different person. Perhaps his coma had been a form of cocoon, a phase he had to undergo in deep sleep in order to become who he needed to be. Perhaps he wasn't really asleep but communicated with non-human beings differently throughout those years. Perhaps he forgot all about it and, having rejoined humanity in its customary upright shape, could no longer understand the language of trees and interpret the trembling of the sides of his intensive care bed as he had when comatose — as the thought pattern of Earth itself.

The serious writer was aware of a paradox at the heart of his art: his inner world, the place of the strongest stories, was infinite, but it was also embedded in — if this was possible! — an even more infinite universe of all things to write about. It was like seeing the Grand Canyon from outer space — a huge gorge that looked like a thin trickle, impossible to miss, hard to hit.

“But my last story will not be about art or finding myself”, the serious writer said and opened his eyes. The air was clear again but his friend had left and robbed the writer of his audience.

“My last story will be about love”, he said bravely.

