

# Open Orchidae

by Quirina Roode-Gutzmer

Tuesday would have been any old morning for Jana had she woken up at the usual time when the alarm clock chimed. Not even a sheer outline of a moon gave reprieve to the darkness of that night's brevity. Jana's feet shuffled, with purpose, down the stairs towards the kettle, to the tap to fill it, and back again to boil the water, which she then poured onto green tea leaves in a sieve in a cup. After some minutes, which seemed metred from an hourglass made from a Möbius strip, she tempered the brew with cold water lest a scalded tongue remind her, all day, of her lack of patience. An excruciating sense of futility overwhelmed Jana on that fateful day.

"What does anything mean?" she asked herself, but not for the sake of wanting to know, because she already knew that the answer was: nothing.

"Everything goes in a cycle and then ends. Everybody dies. Everything ends. Is hope not just passive ... a kind of waiting ... for something to happen?"

Even though she felt lightness in her feet on her way back upstairs, there was gravity in her head because she was simply going through the motions of the ending process of everything, wasn't she? Her mercurial mind noticed the orchid by the window on the landing, which she had nurtured for two years. It was a blue moon ago since the orchid last lost its flowers. In that time Jana had struggled to find the right place for it, one that was not so bright that the sun would burn it, but also not too dark, where it could perish. The orchid plant of nameless source had two stems laden with thick purple buds, matt and waxen.

"They have looked like this for weeks."

In her mind she saw a fast forward footage of the buds shrivelling up and falling off without even blooming.

Jana had a special way of watering the orchid. On Tuesdays she gave the plant a glass of water and after an hour she poured the excess water that passed through the orchid's pot over to the next

---

Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/quirina-roode-gutzmer/open-orchidae>»*

Copyright © 2012 Quirina Roode-Gutzmer. All rights reserved.

plant, so that the orchid could not rot. Now she went through these motions, like she always did, but fretting that somehow on this cursed day that she was doing it wrong, or perhaps she had forgotten to do it last week and today would be too late to save the buds, which were probably just at that pre-dying stage. Should she give it fertilizer, she wondered, worrying that a new measure like that, which up till now she had not implemented, might ruin everything.

“But what does that matter? It will decay anyway ... eventually,” she told herself.

For a few hours Jana was trapped in this state of mind, revelling in it as though it was a kind of super intelligence, as though all her hindsight knowledge were at her fingertips, which strikingly resembled the future in a mirror-image kind of way. It was as though she possessed the power to see through the one-way glass of now, when she was only supposed to see a reflection of now and its past. She actually loathed this sense of omniscience, which she knew could only be temporary, but where to find the patience? Of course it could get worse first. The cynicism could turn into nihilism, or even worse turn into a delusional form, where she could start thinking that she was dead, when she actually wasn't. Nietzsche claimed that God was dead, she recalled.

“There would have to have been a God in the first place, at least once, before there could be a dead one. And if there was a God, he will, eventually, have to die, because everything does, even the universe as we know it, will die. Perhaps Nietzsche was a cynic and God was a delusional nihilist,” she said, “and that would make me an agnostic cynic in a Nietzschean world.”

While she avoided the work she was supposed to do and while she struggled with the entropy law of thermodynamics, she found herself thinking of all the people in the world and how fickle they all seemed. This is what she was thinking: They were all burning Earth's oil and sending carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and some of them were burning it while telling the cyberspace world how awful it is that these oil companies are just only in it for the

money. What are the consumers of oil (or any kind of energy for that matter) in this world for? Why are the other people, the so-called do-gooders, the wanna-be do-gooders, or the pretender do-gooders, in it? The ones of politically correct words, but inert of action. The ones that send images in your face in cyberspace of all the disasters on the planet, but what they are actually doing is desensitising people by making people see the same thing over and over again, and diffusing the responsibility, instead of channelling it. If they really believed in feeding a starving child in Africa, then why don't they get on that aeroplane fuelled by Earth's oil (because that is the way it is right now, and to fuel an aeroplane organically or sustainably is as impactful to the planet as using petroleum) and go and feed those children, take pictures, footage, write a reportage, and then tell the world in cyberspace.

"These oil-burning people who are online all day clicking 'like' all over the virtual place. Why?"

"Do they really read, look or listen to the article, story or poem posted in cyberspace, or are they just using reciprocal marketing techniques to make us look at their stuff, maybe even trying to make us buy it? And I don't mean buying necessarily with money, but buying it intellectually, or even emotionally."

"Are we all just bragging shamelessly, laying out our ego goods? Are we all spammers in some sense?"

Jana must be one of them somewhere along the line, she thought, finding the thought quite appalling, that she too was as fickle as the rest of them. But, she argued with herself in favour of the human race to which she wanted to belong:

"It is not that they are so fickle, but that I am seeing the world not as I ought."

"The difference here is perhaps that those other people, who are as fickle as I, do not necessarily think that they are fickle; they are obviously not seeing the world as I am."

"That just makes me," she said, "a plain damn cynic."

As Jana reached the crescendo of this mental condition on this particular Tuesday, she noticed, probably only because she had

primed her proneness to being distracted, that the bottom petal of the most swollen orchid bud was slightly open. The bud hung its head low, just like hers was. She sensed a flutter of excitement and convinced herself that this threatened to overthrow the intellectual plot.

“Will it flower today?”

She began to entertain the idea that perhaps hope was not necessarily something as pathetic as waiting for something to happen, but a kind of patience, or a kind of appreciation of how things are and how things can become.

The phone rang. A friend of Jana's was looking for an accomplice procrastinator.

“I am very willing to be an extra in the show,” Jana said to her friend.

There was much tea drunk on a sun-drenched patio. They laughed a lot and eventually they conjured up a lunch and ate it. Then there was espresso.

“Before I make roots here,” Jana said to her friend, “I should fly home.”

Once home, Jana ran upstairs to the orchid plant, and lo and there she beheld the two bottom petals, which were wide open. A coup was being enacted in her mind, Jana observed, causing a riot with her sensibilities.

“How can life be arbitrary when it has taken 104 Tuesdays of watering this plant and not forgetting to, and hoping ... that it will bloom?”

This was as rare an occurrence as the blue moon, Jana thought. She then shared this with a friend, this epiphany, this little euphoria, which was threatening to give meaning to her day, and to her life. She then felt her rational mind disengaging slightly, sort of slipping, and creating a blind spot, where she was failing to see the world for what it was.

“This is just a short-lived pleasure, which will deteriorate by the law of impermanence.”

“We can only be certain of the ends of things,” she reminded herself.

“The only certainty is death. We cannot know of beginnings and births until they happen, if they happen at all.”

But Jana insisted to see this little miracle, this antidote for the mundanity of existence.

The day started flowing to the other end of the pendulum swing, where it shimmered and glimmered, like the moon waxing. And then the topmost petal of the first orchid flower opened. The thought that the other petals might not follow suit did not even occur to Jana, because her heart was in government now. She was not thinking of ends, she was feeling beginnings, creation.

“That smacks of divinity,” she caught herself thinking.

This was now the new omniscience. Jana rushed around looking for something to write with, and on. Suddenly there were all these ideas, these words, synonyms and similes, metaphors and music, pictures and plots, and no butterfly net to catch them. When she could write them with her fingers in the sand, she would, when she could scratch them on the back of an envelope with a stump of a pencil, or tippity tap, clickety clack them on her computer, she would, and indeed she did do exactly that.

She wrote and wrote and wrote. It was her job to write, but right now she was not writing for work, for money, but for something else. The sun was busy setting on a midsummer's day, and it was still Tuesday, the same one, and the flower stretched itself open and completely up like a yogi in warrior pose looking up at the sky like there was no tomorrow. No longer was it a downcast bud of promising potential, but it was now fluorescing in full Fibonacci splendour: three outer petals, two inner petals, all of the petals veined a darker shade of pink, with a delicate speckled, and finely petalled, fertile core. If she were a six-legged creature, she imagined:

“I would want to enter there and imbibe its perfume, drink the nectar of the gods, and leave with gold dust on my belly.”

Jana caught herself relishing this audacious thought and remembered what a friend had told her once: “Don't fret about the do-gooders. Just be yourself.”

We all make an impact on the Earth and we should be kind to the Earth, and responsible with our resources (that also applies to the oil companies), but being a martyr to the Earth, or to humankind, or to ourselves serves no purpose other than to accelerate our becoming compost.

The pendulum then needed to ebb, for that is a law of nature, like the moon must wane. Because a pendulum is not in perpetual motion, there are moments when the pendulum slowly finds a centre and it seems to stand still there. That is when we are fully aware, where our sense of timing precisely matches that of the universe, where how we see things is exactly how they really are. In this moment we understand. And it is here that we realise that patience, like hope, is not something as passive as waiting for something to happen, but that patience is an act of understanding. When a cynic thinks that nothing matters, because it will all end anyway, it is a truth seen in a horrible way. And when we look at an organism of life in full bloom giving birth to new life, it is a truth seen in an exquisite way, and this also does not matter, because life will begin and end and it will go on, with us and without us, whether we ‘like’ it or not.

And then there was Wednesday.

And there were other days.

There were many more blue moons.

Jana became more in touch with the sentience of beings and wrote a few philosophy books that were read by many people, including fickle ones. Eventually, Jana grew wiser and older, but she never worried about people quoting her work. She saw no need to own the words she wrote, because her self was fulfilled.

Then Jana died. Her coffin was covered in flowering orchids. People carried on quoting from her books posthumously like there was no tomorrow. By the time all her bones turned to dust, which nourished the orchids that grew there—her immortality—seen and eddying in the lungs of passers-by, became diluted in the same

homeopathic dosage as her words, her books and even her famously quoted aphorisms, amongst billions and billions of others.

Eventually, human beings as a species punctuated evolution by becoming extinct.

The sun died an average star death.

The universe ran out of time.

And then eventually, there was nothing.

Nothing.

