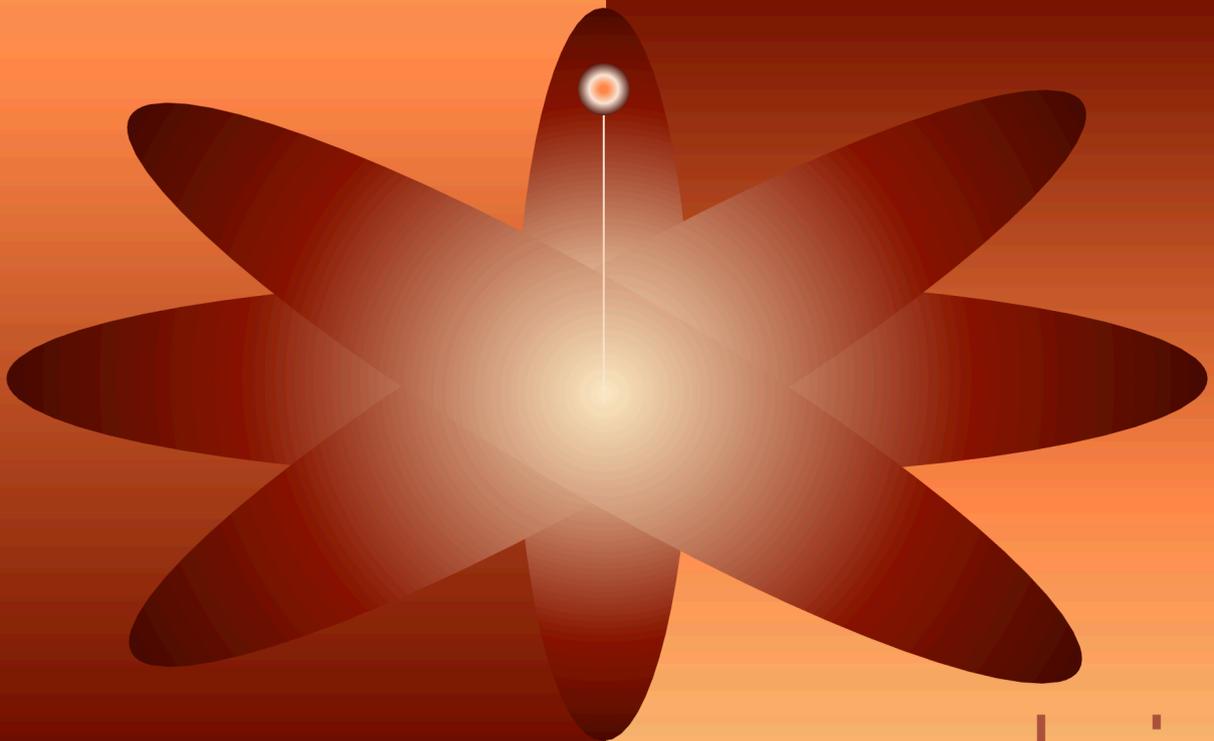


THE
FINAL
INCIDENCE



mark j
suddaby

a short story

THE FINAL INCIDENT

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a short story

Author

Back Cover

Having been teased by the greats like Stephen Baxter and Peter F. Hamilton as to what's actually there at the end of the universe, I decided to go take a look for myself. Smiley face.

THE FINAL INCIDENT

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The Great Emergence.

sample

They're nearly here.

I'm standing on a craggy, volcanic shore looking out, westwards and up into a clear, studded, night sky, raked through diagonally by the milky starwash of the galactic plane. The Pretecean Sea - a misty cyan blue during the day - laps against the micro-pored, carbonaceous rock that chafes and rakes my bare feet. The prickling pain, mild as it is, is a good thing. It roots me in the moment, reaffirming the truth of it. Life is such a precious thing and yet so many of us now choose to un-live it. To hide like cowards in the machine-made worlds of the Metaverse. Well, I choose the real and a life lived, pain and all, and my feet are proof of that. At my back is the scar-continent of Lacerenna. It is not well populated, being little more than a great planetary fold of long dead volcanoes that link the northern ice cap with the southern one. I'm on the planet, Krit, but I am not Kritish; this is not by birthworld. That world - Cinnegarr - was lost to me before I was lost to it. Sadly.

Not all believe.

I came to Krit because this world was one of the earliest to be settled by those first, intrepid, hero space-walkers who stepped out from Cradle without really knowing what they would find underfoot in the Great Void. Now *that* was living. Even we, the lived, cannot match that level of life truth. We're not even a charcoal smudge in the shadow of those shining lives. Back then, the early worlds had names linking them back to Cradle, like Panafrica and Neu Potsdaman, but such childish comforts fell out of favour once Cradle was lost. Better to be who we are now than be chained to a desiccated past. And yet still, I felt the need to walk, barefoot upon the lacerating, primal ground of an early settled world, to feel that connection with the ancient past between my toes. Perhaps it's because of where I am going; the past is all I'll have. All I'll see. And so very very much of it.

Something like that, anyway.

Yes. Better to see the past - that foreign country - as *all* that I'll have. We pretend to be focused on the future when really we're fixed by what is already dust under our feet, which is our only abiding truth. A question for the Quissitor, maybe.

If I'm brave enough.

The night sky is a manifold wonder, and to be seeing it live, through my own gloriously inadequate, gelatinous eyes, is a true blessing. If I tried I could perhaps name some of the worlds visible only as faintly warbling light against the great curtain of a diminishing universe; and not by their peculiar wavelength, but their position do I know them. Just there - as I stare out and focus on light cast centuries past and lightyears hence - galactic east of the Verei Sweep, Yamiyirr: a world of four billion souls; cold, orbiting just inside the outer edge of the life-zone, but rich in large, lumbering, nomadic life that roam the tundra to feed. A world with so much potential still, but one lost to the un-lived because the real is tough; you can't rewind and go again out here where a brearie scratch is fatal. And there, resting on the upper shoulder

of the Crisanthene Nebula, Xannax: a water world where the adapted inhabit the coral reefs and cluster about the thermal vents, all but cut off from The Dependency within which their world roams. And of course there, almost lost against the creamy light of the Galactic Core, my own world of Cinnegarr: a glitzy, neon-lit technosphere offering every form of un-lived satiation and immersive simulation that the imagination can conjure. Plus so very many that it cannot, so that the machines do the thinking until the un-livers are left as little more than pulpy blobs of dimly firing synapses lost in a diorama of something else's curation. But safe, so very safe, from the missteps and the perils of a life lived truly out here in the real.

Do you know what really, genuinely terrifies me? Not the chance-death that a lived life can bring. Nor even a choice-death. I accept these as part of my decision to frequent the real. No; it's that I can't be absolutely, completely sure that I am... *out here*, under a Krit night-sky watching the slow decent of three Settled Notion ships standing imponderously upon the blue-white cushions of their atmospheric drive plumes. That I am not just some un-lived pretender back on Cinnegarr playing at being one of the truly lived, submersed in some clever simulacrum, so that I come to live the lie. That's my most base, most guttural fear. That I'm not even being true to myself and that even the pinprick pain in my feet is feigned. Luckily, our Order requires Faith and that I do have. *That* is a truth that cannot be canned and then piped into a immersion tank.

I think, anyway.

So yes; the three ships. They've come to collect me and transport me to The Settled Notion baseworld of Observance where the Quissitor reside to oversee our Belief and defend the future of every living soul. And the past, for that must be defended too - as our Order believes - including the craven un-liveds'; even their future-past is deserving. Even them.

And that is where I come in.

I am Prittesh, an - well, until recently - Initiate of The Settled Notion (our Sacred Order) and I have been chosen to become Witness to The Final Incidence. This is a very great honour of course and I am much joyed to have been chosen. Confused, a little, for I am, or was, merely an initiate of the Order, having only been Sworn for a few centuries, but it is best not to question the settled will of the Quissitor, I guess.

The ships will land at the main port at Kri on the neighbouring continent of Byrelienne. They will send a pod out to collect me and then I will undergo a ceremonial cleansing before the point-of-pain test to affirm my worthiness as a true, life liver. These are important, if slightly arcane, ritualistic acts needed to reassure the Faithful before I can be taken into the belly of the orbiting wombship and transported from this spiral arm world back to the Core; to the heart of our Order and the nub of all humpan existence.

So I have until dawn then, to savour this beautifying sight. This mesmerising night. To stand at the centre of a life-sized planetarium dome containing within it a warm and humid worldscape, and with the galaxy entire thrown up upon its inner, onyx shell. And within all that glitter-dust, lives The Dependency and all its Central World Dominions: of Norma, Scu-Crux-Scu, Carina-Ttarius, Ori-Cygnus, Perseus and the rest. And held within each, countless

humpan worlds scattered like spilled salt across this bejewelled firmament. And underfoot, a reassuringly physical surface of hard, solidified, once-molten rock and a soupy sea of blue. The local sun will rise at my back and so I think I shall sit awhile and watch the new day chase the ebbing night away. It will make a good memory to take with me to Observance, and from there, on...

To the very end of time itself.

More than a century has passed since I landed, with much pomp, upon the sacred ash of Observance and then to be ushered into the reclusion of Mother Querinary's thunderous halls that mark the heart of The Settled Notion: the Regaled Seat of The Pluralistic Quissitor theirselves. And they have, many periods since, taken time away from their own lived experiences and Sacred observances to speak with me, to prepare me for what is to come. Again, I am humbled by their agreed choice.

I am a much mellowed humpan these days; far more so than the tightly wound and introspective woman I was back on Krit. Not much time, but enough, has passed to allow me to fit things better into a perspective that I can mentally lug about. Such challenges, such pressures and expectations are for the lived of course. For us alone to bear. The burdens of an entire race to be borne upon so few shoulders. But as I say, I focus more now on the journey and let the others here obsess over the destination. And I find myself a better person, my lived experiences more wholesome, now that I have come to take myself less seriously. I think others like to be around me more too, and although I do not need their company - indeed, where I am going such interdependencies would be a cruel tie - I am finding pleasure in being liked (rather than merely Revered). The shadows are my home, but for now, I am enjoying a little sun on my face. Memories to bask in during the travels to come.

Observance is a volcanic world, much like Krit only here the crater-like calderas boil and rage and spew their molten magma in lumpy arcs and crawling rivers across the husked surface so that it is a dichromatic world of pitted black and luminous orange. The Mother Querinary is located in a tectonically safe zone though, and the instability keeps others away, allowing our Settled Notion Belief freedom to find its hallowed form.

And utility.

Back to me again - I'd blush, but I'm always flushed, either by the heat or the skulking adulation I can't tell. Ha! See, much mellowed by time. Time. The one thing, I - alone - suddenly don't have so very much of. How strange to see it that way. I will have all that this universe can bestow, and yet... So yes, an arid and an acrid world but ideal for our designs. And not always called Observance. The walkers out from Cradle called it first, Hadeece, then later Perdicious before settling upon Hel. An angry, dense little molten ball of flame and fume, barreling around just outside the barycentre boundary of the inner Galactic Core. Planets this close in to the supermass don't fare well (or live long) in any case, but it is a good location from which to launch our great enterprise. In terms of matters mundane, that boils down to launching, well, me - which is all it takes to save an already doomed universe and our race's place within it: a single humpan flung off and up, galactic north away. I once felt that pressure acutely, but not so much anymore. The Quissitor has helped in that regard.

‘You will be pleased to know, The Revered Prittesh, that the designs for the vehicle that will carry you to the end of time are nearing finalisation,’ says the Quissitor, in their usual high-pitched nasal whine. There are three instances of them in the chamber this day. The low, icy lighting doing little to banish the amber glow that envelopes all and gives the high halls of the Mother Querinary a permanent end-of-the-world-vibe, as if the walls will shake loose and collapse at any moment, Pompeii style. I wonder what that was? Pompeii. A planet perhaps, like Observance. Alive and angry. The Quissitor are a pale-grey being, with a long neck, blood red, slug-like lips and ice-white, crystalline eyes. They are bald and wear tight rings of cold-rolled polonium about their neck, accentuating its contorted length, from which hangs a loose, gossamer shift of the most sheer silk. I often fear an errant ember carried in on a thermal squall will set the thing to instant flame, but that is the risk of the real. And, it is likely treated against such threats. Against that amber glow, the Quissitor is a boney shade of folded skin; a ghostly apparition in sooty cream.

When I first came to converse with the Quissitor, I would mentally assign numbers to the instances in an attempt to answer each when addressed by one in turn. But I quickly learned that to do so is folly. For not only are they identical in appearance, but also in thought and expression. So despite being addressed by the iteration over my right shoulder, standing at a tall window that looks out across a lava field, it is the Quissitor lounging on the steps leading to the Regaled Seat, that I answer, with:

‘Then soon enough construction will commence and my time here will grow short, Quissitor.’ I like to add the honorific when they use my name, but I do not feel cowed by their presence. Not any more, anyway. They sit upon the Regaled Seat but I am *The Revered*. Beyond this audience I have become a power here, despite possessing no will or desire to wield such a thing. I have wondered if that’s why I was picked. Humility being the trait held up above all others. To hold power without ever being desirous of wielding it.

Perhaps.

‘Indeed. Centuries only, most certainly. You are living in your last millennia, subjectively, Prittesh. How does that make you feel?’

‘Old, Quissitor.’

‘Ha! Old. Indeed. Like the universe, eh?’

I do not answer, as I know them bringing that up will allow the Quissitor to segue to the reason for our conversation this day.

‘The vessel will be built, our Revered Child, and soon. The blink of a universal eye and you will be beyond our ministrations. Are you ready, we wonder?’

‘I do not know. How can anyone truly hope to know the answer to that?’

‘Indeed.’ The Quissitor lounging on the steps looks quizzical, but it is the iteration standing by a statue of theirselves that turns and continues. ‘It cannot be known. Aside from *Faith*, the little faith will be our guide in this. We must have a little faith in you, just as you must in us. So then let us talk of the reason, noting that we cannot truly know the preparedness.’

‘I have a question, first, if...’ I never like to interrupt a conditioning session, for that is what these are, but with time growing so short, I need to change my sense of our relationship. To move it from a student-master paradigm to colleagues, co-workers, conspirators.

‘Please.’

‘I wonder how I can be sure that this, *this*,’ I spin around on the balls of my feet to take in the high ceiling, the room, the flaming, papaya sky beyond and the infinite universe yonder still, ‘is truly the real. How can I be sure that I am not drowning in a tank of virtuality, long since lost to its selfish duplicity?’

‘You cannot.’ It is the instance by the window, behind me, that answers.

‘So then how can I know that I-’

‘Again,’ says the iteration sitting up now, on the lower step, ‘you cannot, not truly. That is what Faith is for. And in any case, even were all this a deviant and dishonest simulacrum, would you choose to act any differently, not being certain either way? Would you not be compelled to act as your conscience dictates in case it isn’t, on the off-chance that this *is* the real and you are indeed a life liver as you so fervently hope, and not just some un-lived inhaling the pretence of one living true in the hot, the hard, the real of it all?’ The Quissitor breathes, calms, their voice having reached a new level of aural penetration.

‘I... but I,’ but I trail off knowing that the Quissitor is right. And really just wanting to hear someone else - the head of our Order, ideally - say it out loud. To allow the truth of the ambiguity of existence to pass through my tympanic membrane and into my brain and not simply feel like a constant product of it. The Settled Notion is an Order of exactly that. One cannot question its fixed presumptions, and yet I needed to, just this once, and have the Quissitor assuage me of my doubts.

‘You are right to ask. Many don’t, out of fear, but it is important to understand, to embrace, even, the uncertainty of what seems so assured, for how can the real not be taken as an absolute? But then also, why must it?’ says the Quissitor on the step, as she runs stick-like fingers over her rheumy scalp. ‘We often think,’ their voice is becoming more shrill now, as they slip into recollection, ‘that the asking of that question is itself proof that the asker (at least) exists in the real, for why would the machines write *that* into their dioramas? It’s too philosophically abstract, too likely to distract. Surely they care capable, but we wonder why they would seek to layer in such potentially, mentally destabilising a notion. So not proof of course, but a comfort as you prepare to venture forth.’

‘Thank you. It will be succour to know that even the Quissitor theirselves can-’

‘Oh, indeed,’ says the Quissitor by the statue without turning, before the iteration at the window carries on, with; ‘We wish now to discuss the *reason* for this great endeavour. We have spoken of it many times, but such a critical component, one at the core of our Belief, can never be over-spoken of. We are on the cusp of universe’s shift from high-noon to ebbing twilight in any event, even before you embark upon this wondrous thing. So knowing why, what, you journey forth for, is so central to all things that we can never talk too much of it.’

Again, I do not answer, sensing that they are not yet done.

The Quissitor by the steps, the one I am still facing as I stand in the centre of the chamber, continues. ‘Soon; sooner than you think and before you will ever believe yourself ready, you will be sent to the end of time. There to save the universe itself, even at its end. And how? How, Prittesh, will you achieve such a god-like task, hmm?’

These are rhetorical, the Quissitor liking the sound of their own softly screeching voice as they build their cause and climb their mountain of Belief. So I stay silent, keeping my features locked in an expression of concentration and solemnity.

‘Will you smite the universe’s last breath, its Final Incidence, and in so doing undo, somehow, the Big Crunch, or the Heath Death, or the Big Freeze, or the many other theories and monikers put forward over humpanity’s long and lonely existence in this reality?’

Now, as custom dictates, I am to answer. ‘No, Quissitor,’ I say, as if in some immersive, partaking in a group conditioning event. In truth, I am, though not while tanked.

‘No, for there is no great device that will undo The Final Incidence. That will stop the universe from ending and taking us along with it. The evidence is all around. Suns are dying. The era of the black holes is nearly upon us. Matter is being consumed. And have we not - The Settled Notion - spent the length and breadth of *our* real determining the precise moment that The Final Incidence will occur?’

‘Yes, Quissitor.’

Now the instance by the window picks up the monologue and continues. ‘Yes, indeed. And so, we ask again, Prittesh, how will you save us all. Save humpanity from winking out of existence as if it had never been?’

‘By continuing to observe, Quissitor. By bearing Witness to The Final Incidence will I mark our spot in the transuniversal migration to come.’

‘Through the simple act of observing, yes. To see the very final thing there is to see. Indeed,’ says the Quissitor at the window.

The gangly figure by the statue picks up the speech. ‘And yet, The Settled Notion, as you understand it, Revered One, holds in its heart, a secret. There is more to our Belief than merely observing to preserve, before witnessing the end of this reality. No, we will be asking one more thing - one more Great Thing - of you, than that.’

The iteration, perched now, hawk-like, on the steps simply smiles, their lips drawing into crimson worms, before expanding upon the point.

On another occasion I ask the Quissitor - there are five present this time - why me. Why pick a lowly initiate with little training, from a rim world. And all they say, in that slightly grating voice, while rubbing the rings of their neck with straw-like fingers, is, ‘why not you?’ And they have a point. If all that is required to bear witness, is a Witness, then the only true criteria is a pair of eyes with which to see and mind with which to know and be known. And thus is the humpan race saved by one such as I: the very definition of an everypan. And perhaps in that there is some majesty. Some circularity. The time for heroes has long since passed, lost to

an age when the universe was young and still expanding. Now, at dusk, it is just us, and so we will have to do.

On another occasion still, I ask how the Quissitor, how The Settled Notion, can truly know what will happen at the end of time, and again the Quissitor answers in enigmatic style, as if they are the voice of a universe slipping quietly away. They say, ‘we can not, how could we, but you will, and that’s enough. For not to go and try, well that would be the true crime. The sin that the un-lived bear. At least we have sense enough to know to ask, even if we cannot predict the answer with much accuracy. Perhaps the truth lies beyond the unobservable event horizon of the supermass. Or maybe it is encoded within the DNA of all life. Or, perhaps you will become the only lifeform in the history of space and time to know it, only then for The Final Incidence to consume you and it along with you. Known and lost in a single instant.’

- end of sample -

want to find out what happens next? you only have to ask: me@markjsuddaby.com

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mark j suddaby

Born in England, in the year of Apollo 13 and Luna 17, Mark grew up sitting in front of the telly, in his paisley pyjamas, staring wide-eyed as *Doctor Who* (Tom Baker), *Space 1999* and *Blake's 7* romped across wobbly sets in their terrible outfits and bad hair. Mark grew up in a large family, which conversely meant time spent playing alone, often within the confines of a boundless imagination.

At sixteen, Mark realised that he was unlikely to become a genuine space hero - and school hadn't been a huge triumph - so he joined the Army. After a modicum of mild success here and there, Mark left the military after 25 years having reached the dizzying heights of the sixth floor of the Ministry of Defence, where he worked as a staff officer, preparing papers for senior officers and wishing that he was anywhere else in the universe.

Mark now lives in the West Country where he spends most of his time trying to get his Lotus to think that it's a car and wondering what it would be like, if...

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The Final Incidence

The Settled Notion is a simple thing. A single Belief, but one must have Faith to truly know it. Something only the true life lovers have and even then, only a select few of us. I was once an initiate of our Order, then to become The Revered and now Witness. Here to observe the death of our universe so that it can die.

And why?

Well, now there's a thing to ask. I watched the Cascade, and it barely drew a tear. I watched my race fight the entropy of a contracting universe and pondered the point of their railing against the dying light. I watched as my beloved's ashes became dust became muons and felt the crushing guilt of it. And I have waited, countless aeons, for this moment. Simply to Witness and in so doing, save us all, even though I alone remain.

I am Watcher, Witness, God-To-The-End-Of-Time.