

RAUTAVAARA'S CASE

PHILIP K DICK

The three technicians of the floating globe monitored fluctuations in interstellar magnetic fields, and they did a good job until the moment they died.

Basalt fragments, traveling at enormous velocity in relation to their globe, ruptured their barrier and abolished their air supply. The two males were slow to react and did nothing. The young female technician from Finland, Agneta Rautavaara, managed to get her emergency helmet on, but the hoses tangled; she aspirated and died: a melancholy death, strangling on her own vomit. Herewith ended the survey task of EX208, their floating globe. In another month the technicians would have been relieved and returned to Earth.

We could not get there in time to save the three Earthpersons, but we did dispatch a robot to see whether any of them could be regenerated. Earthpersons do not like us, but in this case their survey globe was operating in our vicinity. There are rules governing such emergencies that are binding on all races in the galaxy. We had no desire to help Earthpersons, but we obey the rules.

The rules called for an attempt on our part to restore life to the three dead technicians, but we allowed a robot to take on the responsibility, and perhaps there we erred. Also, the rules required us to notify the closest Earth ship of the calamity, and we chose not to. I will not defend this omission or analyze our reasoning at the time.

The robot signaled that it had found no brain function in the two males and that their neural tissue had degenerated. Regarding Agneta Rautavaara, a slight brain wave could be detected. So in Rautavaara's case the robot would begin a restoration attempt. Since it could not make a judgment decision on its own, however, it contacted us. We told it to make the attempt. The fault -the guilt, so to speak -therefore lies with us. Had we been on the scene, we would have known better. We accept the blame.

An hour later, the robot signaled that it had restored significant brain function in Rautavaara by supplying her brain with oxygen-rich blood from her dead body. The oxygen, but not the nutriments, came from the robot. We instructed it to begin synthesis of nutriments by processing Rautavaara's body, using it as raw material. This is the point at which the Earth authorities later made their most profound objection. But we did not have any other source of nutriments. Since we ourselves are a plasma, we could not offer our own bodies.

They objected that we could have used the bodies of Rautavaara's dead companions. But we felt that, based on the robot's reports, the other bodies were too contaminated by radioactivity and hence were toxic to Rautavaara; nutriments derived from those sources would soon poison her brain. If you do not accept our logic, it does not matter to us; this was the situation as we construed it from our remote point. This is why I say our real error lay in

sending a robot rather than going ourselves. If you wish to indict us, indict us for that.

We asked the robot to patch into Rautavaara's brain and transmit her thoughts to us so that we could assess the physical condition of her neural cells.

The impression that we received was sanguine. It was at this point that we notified the Earth authorities. We informed them of the accident that had destroyed EX208; we informed them that two of the technicians, the males, were irretrievably dead; we informed them that through swift efforts on our part we had the one female showing stable cephalic activity-which is to say, we had her brain alive.

"Her *what?*" the Earthperson radio operator said, in response to our call.

"We are supplying her nutriments derived from her body-"

"Oh, Christ," the Earthperson radio operator said. "You can't feed her brain that way. What good is just a brain?"

"It can think," we said.

"All right We'll take over now," the Earthperson radio operator said. "But there will be an inquiry."

"Was it not right to save her brain?" we asked. "After all, the psyche is located in the brain. The physical body, is a device by which the brain relates to-"

"Give me the location of EX208," the Earthperson radio operator said. "We'll send a ship there at once. You should have notified us at once before trying your own rescue efforts. You Approximations simply do not understand somatic life forms."

It is offensive to us to hear the term *Approximations*. It is an Earth slur regarding our origin in the Proxima Centauri system. What it implies is that we are not authentic, that we merely simulate life.

This was our reward in the Rautavaara case. To be derided. And indeed there was an inquiry.

Within the depths of her damaged brain Agneta Rautavaara tasted acid vomit and recoiled in fear and aversion. All around her EX208 lay in splinters. She could see Travis and Elms; they had been torn to bloody bits, and the blood had frozen. Ice covered the interior of the globe. *Air gone, temperature gone ... What's keeping me alive?* she wondered. She put her hands up and touched her face-or rather tried to touch her face. *My helmet*, she thought. *I got it on in time.*

The ice, which covered everything, began to melt. The severed arms and legs of her two companions rejoined their bodies. Basalt fragments, embedded in the hull of the globe, withdrew and flew away.

Time, Agneta realized, *is running backward. How strange!*

Air returned; she heard the dull tone of the indicator horn.

Travis and Elms, groggily, got to their feet. They stared around them, bewildered. She felt like laughing, but it was too grim for that. Apparently the force of the impact had caused a local time perturbation.

"Both of you sit down," she said.

Travis said thickly, "I-okay; you're right." He seated himself at his console -and pressed the button that strapped him securely in place. Elms, however, just stood.

"We were hit by rather large particles," Agneta said.

"Yes," Elms said.

"Large enough and with enough impact to perturb time," Agneta said. "So we've gone back to before the event."

"Well, the magnetic fields are partly responsible," Travis said. He rubbed his eyes; his hands shook. "Get your helmet off, Agneta. You don't really need it."

"But the impact is coming," she said. Both men glanced at her.

"We'll repeat the accident," she said.

"Shit," Travis said. "I'll take the EX out of here." He pushed many keys on his console. "It'll miss us."

Agneta removed her helmet. She stepped out of her boots, picked them up ... and then saw the figure.

The figure stood behind the three of them. It was Christ. "Look," she said to Travis and Elms. The figure wore a traditional white robe and sandals; his hair was long and pale with what looked like moonlight. Bearded, his face was gentle and wise. *Just like in the holoads the churches back home put out*, Agneta thought. *Robed, bearded, wise and gentle, and his arms slightly raised. Even the nimbus is there. How odd that our preconceptions were so accurate!*

"Oh, my God," Travis said. Both men stared, and she stared, too. "He's come for us."

"Well, it's fine with me," Elms said.

"Sure, it would be fine with you," Travis said bitterly. "You have no wife and children. And what about Agneta? She's only three hundred years old; she's a baby."

Christ said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me, you can do nothing."

"I'm getting the EX out of this vector," Travis said.

"My little children," Christ said, "I shall not be with you much longer."

"Good," Travis said. The EX was now moving at peak velocity in the direction of the Sirius axis; their star chart showed massive flux.

"Damn you, Travis," Elms said savagely. "This is a great opportunity. I mean, how many people have seen Christ? I mean, it *is* Christ. You are Christ, aren't you?" he asked the figure.

Christ said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know my Father, too. From this moment you know him and have seen him."

"There," Elms said, his face showing happiness. "See? I want it known that I am very glad of this occasion, Mr.-" He broke off. "I was going to say, 'Mr. Christ.' That's stupid; that is really

stupid. Christ, Mr. Christ, will you sit down? You can sit at my console or at Ms. Rautavaara's. Isn't that right, Agneta? This here is Walter Travis; he's not a Christian, but I am. I've been a Christian all my life. Well, most of my life. I'm not sure about Ms. Rautavaara. What do you say, Agneta?" I

"Stop babbling, Elms," Travis said.

Elms said, "He's going to judge us."

Christ said, "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully, it is not I who shall condemn him, since I have come not to condemn the world but to save the world; he who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already." .

"There," Elms said, nodding gravely.

Frightened, Agneta said to the figure, "Go easy on us. The three of us have been through a major trauma." She wondered, suddenly, whether Travis and Elms remembered that they had been killed, that their bodies had been destroyed.

The figure smiled, as if to reassure her.

"Travis," Agneta said, bending down over him as he sat at his console, "I want you to listen to me. Neither you nor Elms survived the accident, survived the basalt particles. That's why he's here. I'm the only one who wasn't-" She hesitated.

"Killed," Elms said. "We're dead, and he has come for us." To the figure he said, "I'm ready, Lord. Take me."

"Take both of them," Travis said. "I'm sending out a radio H.E.L.P. call. And I'm telling them what's taking place here. I'm going to report it before he takes me or tries to take me."

"You're *dead*," Elms told him.

"I can still file a radio report," Travis said, but his face showed his resignation.

To the figure, Agneta said, "Give Travis a little time. He doesn't fully understand. But I guess you know that; you know everything."

The figure nodded.

We and the Earth Board of Inquiry listened to and watched this activity in Rautavaara's brain, and we realized jointly what had happened. But we did not agree on our evaluation of it. Whereas the six Earthpersons saw it as pernicious, we saw it as grand-both for Agneta Rautavaara and for us. By means of her damaged brain, restored by an ill-advised robot, we were in touch with the next world and the powers that ruled it.

The Earthpersons' view distressed us.

"She's hallucinating," the spokesperson of the Earthpeople said. "Since she has no sensory data coming in. Since her body is dead. Look what you've done to her."

We made the point that Agneta Rautavaara was happy.

"What we must do," the human spokesperson said, "is shut down her brain."

"And cut us off from the next world?" we objected. "This is a splendid opportunity to view the afterlife. Agneta Rautavaara's brain is our lens. The scientific merit outweighs the humanitarian."

This was the position we took at the inquiry. It was a position of sincerity, not of expedience. The Earthpersons decided to keep Rautavaara's brain at full function with both video and audio transduction, which of course was recorded; meanwhile, the matter of censuring us was put in suspension.

I personally found myself fascinated by the Earth idea of the Savior. It was, for us, an antique and quaint conception not because it was anthropomorphic but because it involved a schoolroom adjudication of the departed soul. Some kind of tote board was involved, listing good and bad acts: a transcendent report card such as one finds employed in the teaching and grading of elementary-school children.

This, to us, was a primitive conception of the Savior, and while I watched and listened-while we watched and listened as a polyencephalic entity-I wondered what Agneta Rautavaara's reaction would have been to a Savior, a Guide of the Soul, based on *our* expectations. Her brain, after all, was maintained by our equipment, by the original mechanism that our rescue robot had brought to the scene of the accident. It would have been too risky to disconnect it; too much brain damage had occurred already. The total apparatus, involving her brain, had been transferred to the site of the judicial inquiry, a neutral ark located between the Proxima Centauri system and the Sol system.

Later, in discreet discussion with my companions, I suggested that we attempt to infuse our own conception of the Afterlife Guide of the Soul into Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. My point: it would be interesting to see how she reacted.

At once my companions pointed out to me the contradiction in my logic. I had argued at the inquiry that Rautavaara's brain was a window on the next world and, hence, justified-which exculpated us. Now I argued that what she experienced was a projection of her own mental presuppositions, nothing more.

"Both propositions are true," I said. "It is a genuine window on the next world, and it is a presentation of Rautavaara's own cultural, racial propensities." I

What we had, in essence, was a model into which we could introduce carefully selected variables. We could introduce into Rautavaara's brain our own conception of the Guide of the Soul and thereby see how our rendition differed practically from the puerile one of the Earthpersons.

This was a novel opportunity to test out our own theology.

In our opinion the Earthpersons' theology had been tested sufficiently and had been found wanting.

We decided to perform the act since we maintained the gear supporting Rautavaara's brain. To us, this was a much more interesting issue than the outcome of the inquiry. Blame is a mere cultural matter; it does not travel across species boundaries.

I suppose the Earthpersons could regard our intentions as malign. I deny that; we deny that. Call it instead a game. It would provide us aesthetic enjoyment to witness Rautavaara

confronted by *our* Savior, rather than hers.

To Travis, Elms, and Agneta, the figure, raising its arms, said, "I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me even though he dies, he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"I sure do," Elms said heartily.

Travis said, "It's bilge."

To herself, Agneta Rautavaara thought, *I'm not sure, I just don't know.*

"We have to decide if we're going to go with him," Elms said. "Travis, you're done for; you're out. Sit there and rot - that's your fate." To Agneta he said, "I hope you find for Christ, Agneta. I want you to have eternal life like I'm going to have. Isn't that right, Lord'?" he asked the figure.

The figure nodded.

Agneta said, "Travis, I think - well, I feel you should go along with this. 1-" She did not want to press that Travis was dead. But he had to understand the situation; otherwise, as Elms said, he was doomed. "Go with us," she said.

"You're going, then? Travis said, bitterly.

"Yes," she said.

Elms, gazing at the figure, said in a low voice, "Quite possibly I'm mistaken, but it seems to he changing."

She looked, but saw no change. Yet Elms seemed frightened.

The figure, in its white robe, walked slowly toward the seated Travis. The figure halted close by Travis, stood for a time', and then, bending, bit Travis's face.

Agneta screamed. Elms stared, and Travis, locked into his seat, thrashed. The figure calmly ate him.

"Now you see," the spokesperson for the Board of Inquiry said, "this brain must be shut down. The deterioration is severe: the experience is terrible for her, it must end."

I said. "No. We from the Proxima system find this turn of events highly interesting."

"But the Savior is eating Travis!" another of the Earthpersons exclaimed.

"In your religion," I said, "is it not the case that you eat the flesh or your God and drink his blood? All that has happened here is a mirror image of that Eucharist."

"I order her brain shut down!" the spokesperson for the board said: his face was pale: sweat stood out on his forehead.

"We should see more first," I said. I found it highly exciting, this enactment or our own sacrament, our highest sacrament, in which our Savior consumes us.

"Agneta," Elms whispered, "did you see that? Christ ate Travis. There's nothing left but his gloves and boots."

Oh God, Agneta Rautavaara thought. *What is happening?*

I don't understand.

She moved away from the figure, over to Elms. Instinctively.

"He is my blood," the figure said as it licked its lips. "I drink of this blood. the blood of eternal life. When I have drunk it, I will live forever. He is my body. I have no body of my own; I am only a plasma. By eating his body, I obtain everlasting life. This is the new truth that I proclaim, that I am eternal"

"He's going to eat us, too," Elms said.

Yes, Agneta Rautavaara thought. *He is*. She could see now that the figure was an Approximation. *It is a Proxima life form*, she realized. *He's right; he has no body of his own. The only way he can get a body is-*

"I'm going to kill him," Elms said. He popped the emergency laser rifle from its rack and pointed it at the figure.

The figure said, "The hour has come." "Stay away from me," Elms said.

"Soon you will no longer see me," the figure said, "unless I drink of your blood and eat of your body. Glorify yourself that I may live." The figure moved toward Elms.

Elms fired the laser rifle. The figure staggered and bled. *It was Travis's blood*, Agneta realized. *In him. Not his own blood. This is terrible*. She put her hands to her face, terrified.

"Quick," she said to Elms. "Say, 'I am innocent of this man's blood.' Say it before it's too late."

"I am innocent of this man's blood," Elms whispered hoarsely.

The figure fell. Bleeding, it lay dying. It was no longer a bearded man. It was something else, but Agneta Rautavaara could not tell what it was. It said, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?"

As she and Elms gazed down at it, the figure died.

"I killed it," Elms said. "I killed Christ." He held the laser rifle pointed at himself, groping for the trigger.

"That wasn't Christ," Agneta said. "It was something else.

The opposite of Christ." She took the gun from Elms.

Elms was weeping.

The Earthpersons on the Board of Inquiry possessed the majority vote, and they voted to abolish all activity in Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. This disappointed us, but there was no remedy for us.

We had seen the beginning of an absolutely stunning scientific experiment: the theology of one race grafted onto that of another. Shutting down the Earthperson's brain was a scientific tragedy. For example, in terms of the basic relationship to God, the Earth race held a diametrically opposite view from us. This of course must be attributed to the fact that they are a somatic race while we are a plasma. They drink the blood of their God; they eat his flesh; that way they become immortal. To them, there is no scandal in this. They find it perfectly natural. Yet to us it is dreadful. That the worshiper should eat and drink its God? Awful to us; awful indeed. A disgrace and a shame - an abomination. The higher should always prey on the lower; the God should consume the worshiper.

We watched as the Rautavaara case was closed-closed by the shutting down of her brain so

that all EEG activity ceased and the monitors indicated nothing. We felt disappointment. In addition, the Earthpersons voted out a verdict of censure of us for our handling of the rescue mission in the first place.

It is striking, the gulf that separates races developing in different star systems. We have tried to understand the Earthpersons, and we have failed. We are aware, too, that they do not understand us and are appalled in turn by some of our customs. This was demonstrated in the Rautavaara case. But were we not serving the purposes of detached scientific study? I myself was amazed at Rautavaara's reaction when the Savior ate Mr. Travis. I would have wished to see this most holy of the sacraments fulfilled with the others, with Rautavaara and Elms as well.

But we were deprived of this. And the experiment, from our standpoint, failed.

And we live now, too, under the ban of unnecessary moral blame.

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