

# FRANK EXCHANGE

a short story by John Barker ©

harrier@easynet.co.uk

The road ahead was flat and chalky, the landscape new to him; rocky hills and stunted trees with powder-pale leaves. Frank looked for little bursts of dust with each tread of his feet. He didn't see them but they had to be there, it was the nature of dust. It was there, like the all-round presence of non-stop buzzing. Crickets. Or more likely cicadas like they had in California, so he'd read.

Ahead a screen of greenery fenced the road at either side. He moved a little quicker to the shade which appeared to be of bamboo with long, drooping leaves coming out of the tops of the cane. Scuffing the chalky stuff he saw concrete underfoot and below, a dried-up river bed of blanched rocks and stones. Bramble, shrubs and fresh bamboo shoots fought it out on its banks. A strange place, which was no bad thing, being necessarily far away from where it had gone wrong: a business of transit documents and anonymity under the spotlight where they did not belong; and a helter-skelter of switched cabs.

He shrugged and walked on.

Out of the bamboo the road curved to the right and the landscape resumed. It was OK, it was in the nature of roads that they lead somewhere. Brambles like he'd seen on the river banks now ran either side of the road. They formed straggly, thigh-high hedges. It looked like blackberry with the correct shaped fruit. Amongst greens and reds he saw a hairy black one and reached carefully for it.

And spat it out. A con, Green in a Black skin. Which happened, things being not as they seemed. They had happened.

The intricate symphony of insects sounded on. The non-stop. Taken individually, it would be more clack than buzz. He pictured them in each of the stunted trees that seemed to monopolize things tree-wise. In between their

gnarled trunks he glimpsed random stretches of dry- stone wall. On the flatter ground token efforts had been made at ploughing the earth.

Along with the non-stop came a new sound, like there might be bee hives. As the curve of the road opened out he saw no bee hives but could make out parts of the front and side of what had to be a large stone building amongst trees of a different type, ones that were tall, slim and straight. Closer to he saw that the building had what looked like a new roof of red-brown tiles. Exactly! There was no point to roads with no used buildings. It was what he'd been saying all along.

The upright trees were not firs but evergreens of a dry climate and the hum not a hum, more a choir that was loud enough to make the cicadas background. Frank saw that the building had well-made wooden doors and windows. They were solid and neat in the uneven surrounds of stone.

It was a choir. Hard to credit but that's what it was, people, fellow human beings, singing together. About a hundred of them, clearly visible through an arch-shaped open door.

He stepped inside. Some sat, others lounged on dark red cushions. These ran right round the building on its varnished wooden floor, propped loosely against the unplastered stone walls. There were men and women in well-made labouring clothes of corduroy. None of them was old. A few glanced at him but went on with their singing. Or it was chanting, made up of long notes. Either way, no one screamed the house down, him in his suit. He sat down at the edge of the cushioning nearest the door. No heads turned, not even hers, the blonde woman next to him.

The length of the notes made it hard to work out the words but he picked out Cleanse and Place, English words though he knew for a fact, that this was not, England.

No problem, at some point the chanting would stop and things would become clearer. For one thing there were a man and a woman sat separate from the rest in the middle of the floor space. Some kind of priests possibly. While they sang, people wandered in and out by another arch-shaped door at the far end of the building. Nothing too formal obviously which, as Frank saw

it, was no bad thing. On the other hand they were also carrying identical green books. From his point of view, possibly not so good.

The singing stopped, not with a definite cut-off point, all at once, but till there were just a few voices and then silence. Out of the quiet the woman at the centre of the floor cried out, Praise Be!

Praise be and leave us space, the man replied.

Leave us space inside.

And out

Outside and in. The space

To appreciate

To contemplate

That the emptiness be empty

And the full, full. The space

For each to know their place.

Frank stared at beams of dust in the window light, tubes and cones of it. He heard the rustle and bustle of people on their feet and filing out the far door, the congregation. He wasn't sure what to do, no one liked to look a prick.

He did nothing, sometimes it was the thing to do, the best option, to do nothing. And as it happened several of them, the green-books, had remained seated and another blonde woman started to speak. Possibly Danish the accent, Scandinavian for sure. It was all right, the way she spoke, as conversational as you could get with an audience. She talked of her up-and-down relationship with Possibilities and how this was now a thing of the past since she had found a Place. Reading from the green book she talked of the richness of the word Settle; that in so many ways they were both settlers and the settled; and how these many ways were also connected.

She closed the green book and spontaneously explored some examples. The important thing was that if you found the space, the geographical one that was Open To All Who Searched, then one must not waste the opportunity. You settled and in the process became adept at thinking clearly and Settling Things, precisely because you kept the space clear of extraneous matter, of mess.

A bit alternative, though Frank couldn't see the exact shape of it, no godnames, gurunames, or any obvious structure of belief. She had a point though, the speaker, was right though, the speaker, she had a point; to think clearly you did need a bit of peace and quiet which was exactly what he had not had this time around. The way the thing had been, not a chance of it.

He clocked one of the men lighting candles bracketed to their immediate section of the wall. It had gone dark quickly, he'd missed it. The candlelight was pleasant, evidently it was why they hadn't bothered with the electric. They did have it, he'd noticed the light bulbs, but they'd elected to go for the light bulbs. But what of the road, had there been telegraph poles, cables? He tended to think not, but then if he was honest he might well not have noticed, the state he'd been in, trekking along that interminable road.

The woman had stopped speaking and finally they were looking at him; friendly enough, smiling, like they were expecting him to say something. He was quite likely to say the wrong thing but there was nothing for it, no choice, had to give it a bash.

The smiles were encouraging.

Me, well I guess I'm what you'd call an unsettled sort of bloke, he said. Still travelling, searching in my own way.

No one screamed. No one laughed. The woman next to him, the men opposite, they nodded.

But not, at least I don't want to be, a rolling stone in the universe. I mean I do want to gather some moss.

The smiles were normal, the laughter genuine, without derision. Frank relaxed. The question of travel was not something he had considered in general terms or as a process, but he'd done enough of it, plenty. They were listening seriously, you could see it, not overdone, but the way they nodded. He became less tentative and worked towards finishing off with Travelling As A Search in which it was not the destination, the objective that mattered, so much as how one moved. It sounded right.

The discovering then is part of the journey itself, not something left to the last moment. That's how it should be at any rate.

Not so difficult, a lover had once said something similar about lovemaking. He could see it was going down well in this place, they made no bones about showing their appreciation. They were not out-and-out spacers either, one of the women said he must be tired and hungry, that he must come and eat.

She was right. She said it and he realised it was true. He thought of shaking her hand but said simply, Thanks. I'm Jim Faraday.

Outside the full moon showed up another world, a silvery yard around which stood another three stone buildings. The woman, sister Gudrun and a man called brother Wim took him to the nearest one and on up to the second of three floors, an open plan eating and sleeping space. The construction, the craftsmanship were impressive, just as in the building they'd left. Racks of bunk beds made of solid, varnished planking were fitted perfectly into the stone walls underpinned by wooden beams. The long table, the chairs around it, solid and simply designed. He was introduced to the others: there was a Chantal; a Werner; a Brian; a Kirsten. Another, Jean-Pierre was dressed differently, in jeans and a white shirt.

The food was some kind of bean stew on brown, glazed plates. He had been hungry true, but he had to say it was delicious, an interesting sauce. He had eaten such things before, this was not another planet, it was just that it had been superbly done. As a pleasant surprise a modest amount of amber wine was provided from a clay pitcher.

They ate in silence. When he'd finished eating Frank said what a pleasure it had been; how grateful he was; and how civilized they were, in the truest sense of the word.

Round the table they smiled at him.

Can I do anything to help, he asked. The washing up, or maybe something else? Perhaps us travellers have missed a lot but we do pick up some skills on the way.

Was he over-doing it, slimy? No one said anything.

Oh sorry, am I making a gaffe, is this a silent period or something? Or a silent area?

Gudrun looked to Jean-Pierre and back to Frank with an anxious sympathy.

The man smiled suddenly.

Brother Jim Faraday you're an intelligence like a torchbeam which is very welcome. Yes, it is as you say, a silent area.

Frank liked that, the way the guy said it, not the voice of some stuck-up crank.

We don't aim to be weird, Jean-Pierre said, it's just that we keep our talking for the Language House, the building where you first found us. Here we have silence. Everything to its place. And you must be tired, sister Gudrun will show you to your sleeping place.

And that was it, talk about getting a break. A bit bossy the guy, the white shirt like he was one of the chaps, the people who mattered, but you couldn't fault the hospitality; no explanations asked for. His bed was on an upper bunk reached by a wrought iron spiral staircase. He stripped down to his vest and pants without self-consciousness and hung up his suit on the built-in rack above the space to the side of the bed. The sheets were freshly laundered and pressed. There was a hint of lavender.

From below he heard pots, pans and chairs. Lying in bed, breathing in its cleanness, feeling the laundered fabric on his skin and staring at the wooden ceiling, he had no interest in seeing what was going on. He'd wondered briefly how the sleeping arrangements worked out, the sexual set-up, but in the face of the whorls and grain of the wood and the comfort of the sheets it had not held his interest. He'd been frazzled, ragged; he'd been falling and here, out of the blue and hard to credit, he'd landed on his feet. Just like a cat.

Frank awoke from a frustrating dream in which one fax after another had gone unanswered and he'd missed an African by five minutes at a railway station which might have been Hamburg. The African had an exclusive entre into a world cut off by someone else's civil war. He felt the warm airiness of the bedclothes and caught a slice of sunlight through the arched window at the end of the room. He could look at that window for a long time. How extraordinary this restful calm when it was just what he needed at a time when his range of possibilities had been severely limited; when there'd been

nothing but sweaty desperation and flight.

There was no sound from below. He turned over in the sheets for the pleasure of it, touches of cool clung on the skin, and wriggled downwards. The future would come jogging along at him in time, but in the meanwhile the here and now was too good to be missed. Yesterday he'd used up all his energy to produce his own calmness as he walked. Here, calmness was on tap. Rest up. Regroup. He pushed up again out of the sheets and things were still all right. Each thing in its place like the window, something about its arch shape, the fall of light through it. Looking at it brought in the polyrhythms of the cicadas. He heard their steadiness.

Up and dressed he thought that at some point, if and when it felt right, he would raise the question of more suitable clothing. It would be unrealistic to expect full acceptance straight away, but he would pull his weight and over time they would see that he could graft, was a guy who paid his own way whatever the situation. After all the nervous strain he had experienced it would be good to tire himself with some real physical labour and sleep well. A lot of nonsense, all the green book stuff, but they weren't fanatics, he could cope with it.

Down at floor level there were no people but on the table was a teapot, a cup and warm slices of bread. Herbal stuff and tepid with it, the tea, but you couldn't knock it. Outside the sun was directly overhead and the sound of chanting came from the Language House, the temple place. Beyond the third house building two of the corduroy people were doing something. They were at the edge of rows of short trees with straight trunks and a dense umbrella of shiny dark green leaves. Close to, he saw they were watering, pulling some concertina'd green hosing into the grove.

They acknowledged him with smiles and allowed him to help. Around each tree were circular dips in the earth. Water from the hose was applied to each in turn. The trees had round green fruits with shiny pitted skins. He was impressed with the even spacing of the trees and how well the earth was turned. He said so. They were evidently pleased to hear it but did not reply.

He shrugged. This discipline in the matter of talking and not talking, maybe

it became more natural over time. Maybe. He waved goodbye and followed the hose pipe back to its source which proved to be a well with a stone lip some two metres in diameter. Strands of hose came out of it each with its own pressure gauge. From below he heard a motor.

He followed some thinner diameter hose away from the well. It led to what he took to be a communal laundry. Rows of sheets were hung out to dry on sturdy washing lines. Water flowed out into a connecting series of troughs at the far end of which was a four-legged mangle that had rollers wide enough for two sheets. Four of the corduroys smiled at him and went on with their work. He lifted his own jacket and bent his head to sniff at an armpit. Layers of sourness came up out of his body.

He must have pulled a face for one of the women was laughing towards him; she mimicked a sniff, she pulled her face. Frank rolled his eyes skywards like he was number one chump. With a flourish, off came his jacket. She liked that, he could see; she nudged one of the men. His shirt was long, cheerfulness made him bold. He took off shoes and trousers to get at his socks and pants, got them off, and put his trousers back on. The laughing woman came to take his bundle.

I'll do them, at least let me help, he said, pointing at the handle of the mangle.

Do a bit of graft, have a laugh. He fancied it.

It wasn't necessary, her face said it. She took the clothes, pointed to the sun, moved it in the sky and then waved towards the rows of clothes line.

OK, if that's how it was. It would be childish to insist. It wasn't him as an individual they didn't need, looked at realistically they just didn't need anyone else on the job.

He walked off in sockless shoes, trousers and jacket. Past laid-out vegetable plots was a group of the tall straight trees. From nearer the ground he heard the steady dum-dum of pistons. Frank glanced up and down as he stepped through the trees. Behind them stood a square building of brick and cement on top of which were tilted squares of tinted glass. The penny dropped.

The penny had dropped, only when you'd screwed up, when you'd been

screwed up, your confidence wasn't what it had been. Or you were so busy with the screw-up, getting to grips with it, getting out of it, that you might notice things without recording them; or, as likely as not, record without logging them. The Language House had light bulbs: there had been no telegraph poles on the dusty road.

An efficient set-up, you had to hand it to them, cranks but they were well sorted. In a metal frame straddling the eaves of the building sat rows of truck batteries, big bastards. No wastage on the solar stuff, and just in case, like now it seemed, two tough generators taking up the floor space. This place wasn't going to fold tomorrow, they were here for the duration.

He walked back out into the sun. Passing another plot of fruit trees he came finally to a chest-high smooth faced stone wall topped with stiff wire fencing to a height of four metres. In the distance were mountains and hills and, closer to, stunted-looking trees like those he'd seen from the road. In front of these stood a house with a corrugated roof. It had some kind of yard, bits of chicken wire tacked round it on frames made from old bedsteads. Some chickens scurried about. Under one section of the wire held down by three breeze blocks and what might be a rusty scythe, there were two goats. One had horns. A man in blue jacket and brown trousers was shouting at them. Behind him was a shed with uneven strips of polythene stuck on the roof. Next to that, a metal frame that had once had four wheels.

Frank turned away and headed back in the direction of the main complex, going round the other side of the fruit trees. He smelled shavings and sawdust even before he saw the building, one made of stone. Inside was light and airy, there were skylights in the tiled roof. It was quiet, no one at work. Tools were methodically racked, good stuff, Bosch power gear and Stanley hand tools. A nice set-up altogether. Compared to 48 hours ago it was brilliant. Finally, and not before time, he'd been given a squeeze. As to the not talking, he'd looked out for gestures, for sign language but hadn't clocked any. He considered telepathy but it would not do, these people were not that weird, things worked. Perhaps it had just got to the point where in practical matters at least, they just knew what to do.

His shirt was amongst rows of other shirts. His underclothes and socks had a line all to themselves. They were dry and smelled good. What, they had a special day for pants and socks? Maybe they had a special day each.

Back on the second floor they were all there and pleased to see him. His timing had been perfect, they were just sitting down to a meal of salad stuff. Gudrun sat next to him and seemed especially happy. She sniffed at her own corduroys and touched his shirt collar. Whatever their discipline, word got around. Gossip, you couldn't stop it, he'd bet they all talked a bit on the quiet. Anyway, it had to be good for them that sometimes into their lives came someone like himself, from outside. He hadn't been around long but he suspected that for someone like Gudrun things might get a bit dull otherwise. All very worthy no doubt but he'd bet she liked a laugh. Like now, the two of them exchanging a sequence of delicious glances. Her blush was arousingly delicate. Unlikely as it seemed, he might be blushing himself. Either way, no one seemed to mind. He checked for Jean-Pierre but he too was wholly absorbed in eating. And it was good, the salad, a fresh crispness to everything.

When they'd finished he was allowed to help Gudrun with the washing up. A step forward, first signs of a thaw. For a moment their fingers touched under the suds and there were more laughing looks between them till she indicated that they were all going to the temple place.

What was this, blushes, checking Jean-Pierre's reactions like he was a kid? It was himself needed checking, they were all modern Europeans weren't they.

In the Language House there was a crowd and he stayed close to Gudrun, Werner and Kirsten, found cushion space with them. This time there was just the one man in the floor centre, one of those who'd been at the laundry. He had his green book open.

To cleanse the outside is to cleanse the outside, he began. It has its own value, its own joy in the doing. Cleanse us outside and in, Inside and out.

Some chanting followed along similar lines. He kept his eyes on Gudrun. Her face was grave but not pompous, not crazed. He liked it, the expression, her attractive mouth. Looking at it some of the words became clearer, Cleanse

us from impatience, Cleanse us from desire.

Patience, he'd foreseen that popping up. No desire? Constant desire might be more tiring than it was worth but none at all? The acid test was, did someone like Gudrun really want to be without it on a permanent basis? No, without a shadow of a doubt, that would be weird.

Some people left, others re-opened their books as the man in the middle started a new chant.

Wait and be open

For the richness of the plain

Banish the mess.

Where nothing has its place

If he'd had any sense he'd have asked for a green book. It was obvious, the book would be the basics written down, which would save a lot of grief when the chants were a bit on the cryptic side. Only he hadn't asked. And maybe he'd been right not to ask, like Jack de Brok had said one time, situations could be as delicate as a spiders web when it came to the volume of one's own input. So

He leaned for a peep at Gudrun's book but she held it in a way that only she could see. Maybe it was just the way she held it, the thing was hardly a secret, they were saying the stuff out loud.

Let the emptiness be empty

And the full, full, Chantal responded.

It spurred on the man in the middle. Be open where there's space for innocence, he said.

And wise when there is not

Respect each thing in its place

When he'd finished, several people left. Chantal got up to leave. Frank gave her a smile. A woman he didn't know moved on to the floor space: there were settled stomachs and settled minds, she said. Looking around there were around twentyfive listeners, the congregation. Jean-Pierre was one, stood out in his white shirt. Frank thought of leaving, most people had but looked at it this way, that given it was the only time they talked it was possible he might

get a grip of what they were on about without having to hustle for a green book. And if not, he was Showing Willing and in a better position to ask for a copy if that's what it came to.

The word Nomad caught his attention. It seemed nomads were in a category of their own, that was the gist of it, insofar as they kept to the same journey back and forth. Gudrun was up on her feet lighting candles.

Oasis to oasis is a space of in-between that becomes its own place, the speaker said.

And stopped. That was it, cryptic, but interesting. Frank got up to leave and saw a ring of encouraging smiles, all the faces directed at him. He looked for Gudrun. She must have left, lighting the candles her final duty, something of the sort.

They were still smiling, expectant.

OK, if that was what was required.

The nomad, well that's an aspiration I guess, he said. If I'd reached it, and with patience it will happen, this space here, this place would be some oasis. It is an oasis. Seriously. I'm not trying to flatter.

There were still people in and out but he wasn't going to take that as a reflection on what he was saying, it was just the way they carried on. Besides there were happy smiles on the faces of his listeners who'd moved in close to hear him better.

But having said that, what is oasis? An oasis? An oasis of calm people say. A place of shade, rest and water. For the camel for sure, paradise for the camel.

He laughed.

Not that it has to be a camel of course, I can think of quite a few places where they wouldn't be quite the article, I can hear several objections, the matter of dung for example.

His boldness paid off. He heard laughter. The blokes in the audience were all white-shirts like Jean Pierre but so what, laughter was good for people. It was a known fact but then no reason to overdo the jokes. He would not overdo the jokes.

What I mean is, the camel to its place. I'm serious. The camel is transport

and the nomad has to choose the appropriate transport for the terrain.

He developed this theme, finding the words coming easier. A couple of the lounging white shirts looked unimpressed but he was holding the attention of Jean-Pierre and the two remaining women.

That isn't all of course, there's the nomad's journey back and forth to the same places as the last speaker said, that's not aimless travel but part of the space as a whole. Place A has salt, too much of it, Place B none at all. In this space between A and B the oasis also has its place, the nomad pleased to see the oasis, the oasis pleased to see the nomad.

Frank liked it, it was pretty good and he got into his stride. A to B was not some kind of void but as much part of the larger space as the oasis itself. In his experience, he said, it was this truth the Traveller could, and had to realise, in order to make the transition to Nomad status.

There were only white shirts left, and they looked solemn but Frank was surprising himself. Things that he knew but never thought, let alone said, were just coming out. Even seriously drunk with Dave de Waal things he Had Not Said.

The transition marked by the point at which the Traveller becomes part of the landscape, part of the space. Not that I'm saying I've got to that point myself but at least I've grasped that the possibility exists.

It sounded right because it was true. Looked at in this light he had in fact nearly made it. Would in fact have made it, only he'd wound up working with arseholes who had introduced themselves as people who weren't arseholes.

I don't know, perhaps I'm not explaining myself very well, I've never tried to put it into words before and besides this, this whole situation is a bit new to me.

There were a couple of nods at that. One of the men was looking studiously at the window, another at his fingernails. Yes? Screw them, what did they expect, he couldn't go on talking for ever. Or maybe they just knew all this. Probably been through it themselves, must have the way they'd got things organised. In this set-up there was money, and there was organization, and it would have been the white shirts who'd seen to that. So at least he was now

talking to the people who really mattered. If you were going to talk, might as well be to them. Any set-up and there were the people that mattered.

What I'm saying is, this each to its place/ each to its space thing, I can see how that and the nomad having his or her space in that bigger space of A, B, and the in-between, does fit together. The two concepts, the two realities fit together. I hope that's made sense.

The candlelight softened the area around him and the flickering faces of the men. Somewhere outside a bird called out. One of the men yawned. From his left someone spoke in a German accent.

26th April brother Jim Faraday, Karachi airport.

What?! Oh, all that good spiel he'd given and out of the blue, a wiseguy.

And so what. So fucking what, Karachi had been no problem.

That's really good, he said. Amazing, I think I probably was.

You flew to Frankfurt Jim Faraday, Jean-Pierre said.

What was this, the know-all in his fucking white shirt?!

It was obvious what it was. Government gurus, never had to graft themselves for anything had they. Trust funds and subsidies, and if that's how it was he'd say thanks for everything and be on his way. No problem, he'd been on the road before. Yes, and so fucking what! Frankfurt? He'd been bored in the transit lounge was all.

Looks like you know better than me, he said.

They'd got closer. OK, OK, so he'd have to leave, no hard feelings. They weren't that fucking clever, the Faraday ID stood up. Yes and when it came to it the set-up wasn't that brilliant. Where were the children? Where were the kids if this was fucking paradise on earth.

Remember Schipol Frank, the 29th? You will remember that won't you.

The guy spoke with a Yorkshire accent. For a moment Frank felt small.

Which was not on: which could not be tolerated.

You want to make something of it you prick, he said.