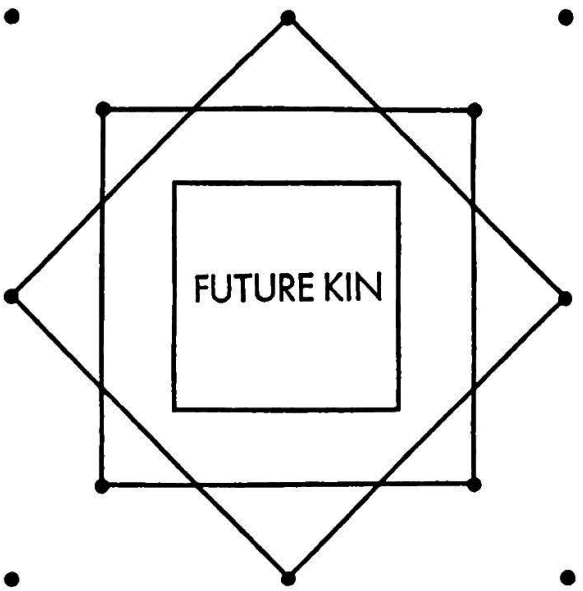
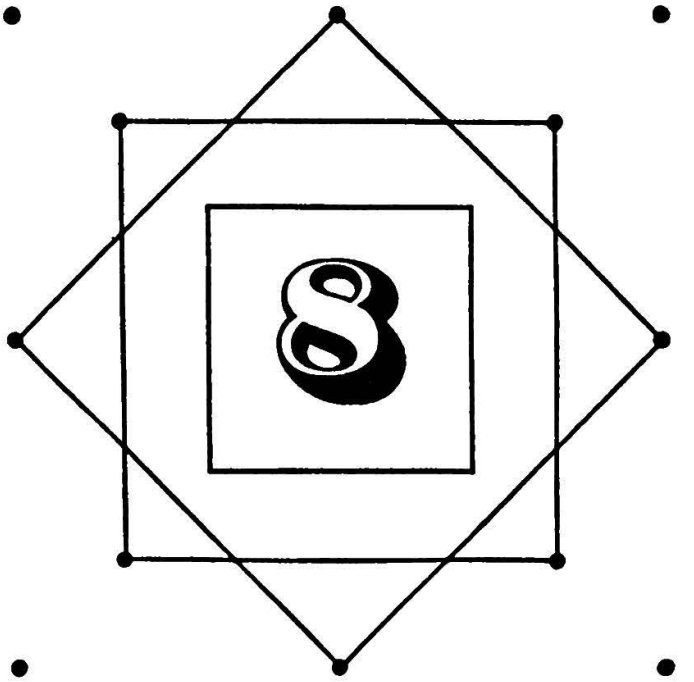

FUTURE KIN

Eight Science Fiction Stories



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FUTURE KIN

RAYMOND F. JONES
CHAD OLIVER
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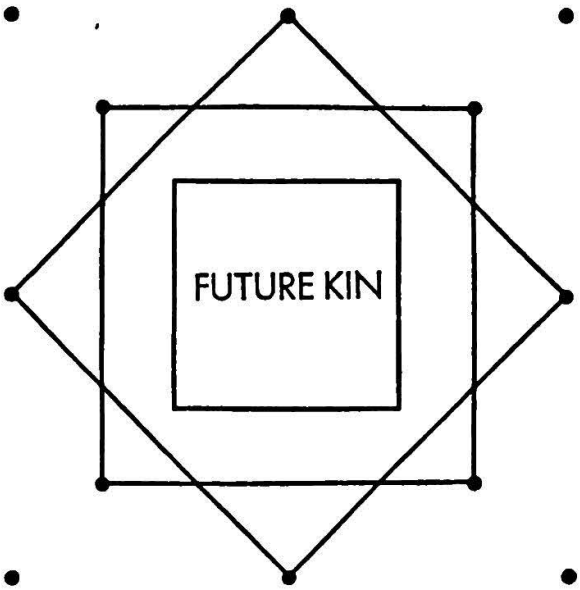
FUTURE KIN

Young people today often are searching for something: a new life-style; a more meaningful relationship with their Creator (as shown by the surging, swelling numbers of Jesus people); and so on. They are backing away from much that the previous generation seems to embrace without compunction: hypocrisies that poison life from the governmental level on down.

Will young people of the future be any different? Will their problems be akin to those that are faced today? Can it be that technological advances will go hand in hand with advances in a sociological sense, thereby creating a better world for all?

Future Kin tackles some of these considerations. Each protagonist *is* a young person of the future, related in a variety of ways to his counterpart of the present.

The stories herein are uncommonly good; and, of course, all eight were written especially for this anthol-

ogy. The authors are among the best known in the science-fiction genre: Raymond F. Jones, Chad Oliver, Mack Reynolds, Joseph Green, Christopher Anvil, Terry Carr, Barry Malzberg, and Thomas Scortia. (Malzberg last year won the first John W. Campbell, Jr., Award for Best Novel of the Year; and Scortia, with Frank Robinson, sold a movie script for four hundred thousand dollars! And the other authors have impressive credentials as well.)

I haven't stuck primarily to one *type* of story, but have covered the spectrum pretty much: Malzberg's "Over the Line" is more new-wavish than anything else; Anvil's "The Knife and the Sheath" is solid adventure; Scortia's "Blood Brother" is Frankensteinish horror; Jones's "Pacer" is social commentary-oriented; and so on. You may think Oliver's "The Gift" is the best story herein, but then again that honor may go to Green's "The Waiting World." Nor is Reynolds' "Generation Gap" one of the less worthy, less enjoyable stories, by any means. And there is Carr's "Rejoice, Rejoice, We Have No Choice," which is one of the author's better stories for young people.

In all, *Future Kin* is full of creative styles, readers with whom you can identify and solid, exciting science-fiction situations. The credits of all those who participated in this book total in the neighborhood of hundreds of short stories, scores of novels and dozens of anthologies. We know the genre intimately, from personal involvement over the years—and have a healthy respect for what readers of science fiction are demanding these days.

Be assured that *Future Kin* has been approached

with seriousness, with quality the ultimate goal but, also, with the purpose of getting together a group of stories that represent hours of enjoyable, worthwhile reading.

ROGER ELWOOD
LINWOOD, N.J.

PACER

by Raymond F. Jones

The cadet class consisted of 199 men and one Pacer.

On a brilliant summer day they boarded the FTL *Robert Goddard* for their final training exercise. In two months they would return, 199 commissioned officers and one decommissioned Pacer—if they were lucky.

It was traditional that they had to destroy the Pacer before the end of this final training mission. If they failed to do so, ill luck would dog every man in the class for the rest of his career.

That was the tradition.

It wasn't killing, of course, although many cadets felt it was almost as bad. The Pacer was a robot, built as a replicate of a human cadet. For six years it had lived with this class, studied with them, and been a brother to them as they had been to each other.

It had a name. It wore the cadet uniform. It had a

family. It was someone's roommate. It bled when it was cut.

It was one of them.

No one knew which one. And neither did the Pacer itself, for it so completely simulated a human being that it thought it was one. All its emotions, loves, and fears were those of a human being. Even the fear of death.

They had to find it before this journey was over.

And destroy it.

Mart Adams dropped his duffel in the middle of the floor and looked around the plush quarters. The place was unlike anything the cadets had known up to now. It was regular officers' quarters.

Behind Mart, Ed Renny pulled up and dumped his bag alongside Mart's. He whistled softly. "So this is what it's going to be like when we finally get those fins pinned to our chests!"

"We're not there yet," said Mart. "This is smoke-screen to throw us off guard. The trip is going to be tough."

"Yeah, I know," said Ed. "Fifty per cent, isn't it? Half the guys who've made it this far wash out on the last trip." His toe touched the thick carpet on the deck. "I wish we had the old steel plate underfoot. That would remind us what we're facing."

"You'd better remember without reminders. Let's get this stuff stowed. You can bet we're under inspection right now."

Ed glanced warily about the room. He knew Mart was right. Somewhere a rivet head concealed a tiny lens through which a continuous record of their private

conduct was being made for evaluation in the finals. Time spent in idle speculation didn't add points, and there was no appeal from the tally, either. It was compiled by computers, the idiot electronic brains that Ed hated with all his heart.

They began stowing their gear. "Do you think we're going to find who the Pacer is before we get back?" Ed said.

"It's none of my business what the rest of the guys do," said Mart. "But I've got a lot more important things than looking for the Pacer. If you expect to get your commission you'd better let the other guys worry about the Pacer. You and me, we've got a mission to run. Let's concentrate on getting those fins pinned on us."

"You don't think it matters if we find him or not?"

"Why should it? So they've planted a robot in the class to pace us and draw us out, maybe to check on us in a hundred ways we don't know about. It's part of the system. The identity of the Pacer couldn't bother me less."

"They say it's bad luck if we don't find him."

"Let the bad luck come to those who believe it."

It made sense, Ed thought. Everything Mart said made sense. For four of the six years in the academy Ed and Mart had bunked together. Ed recognized that Mart was light-years ahead of him in a thousand ways. Mart had a mind like a computer, but with a common sense no computer ever had.

Ed knew his own limitations. He knew he could get where he was going, but he had to take the long way around. He had tried a few times to follow Mart's brilliant short cuts, but that had been pure disaster.

electronic idiots were conceived in insanity and born in despair.

He nodded to his fellows and took his seat.

Commander Turner welcomed the cadets aboard. But most of what he told them they already knew. Many of them would wash out on this final cruise. But all of them could attain commissions if they had what it took. He spoke of the critical exercises that would follow during the next eight weeks. These had been well rehearsed. Cadets knew their basic duties. They didn't know the programed emergencies, disasters, and snafus they would meet to test their competence.

And over all, the Pacer stood forever ready to beat them at their own skills. When they found out who the Pacer was they'd tear him apart memory cell by memory cell.

Some of them would.

Mart Adams was assigned to celestial analysis. This section analyzed the composition of the stars and the space through which the *Robert Goddard* bore. At a velocity of 90 c—ninety times the speed of light—an enormous amount of data was fed from the sensors to the computers and stored on microtape. Printouts of anomalous conditions were examined by the group. There were many of these. The universe was not quite so homogeneous as once believed.

Ed was assigned to navigation center. His strength was in mathematics, where only Mart Adams was above him.

Ed and Mart were assigned staggered shifts and saw little of each other after the ship's routine got under way. They nodded to each other as one duty shift ended and another began. The ship was on a course

toward the Pleiades. For two weeks the routine was without incident. Tension among the cadets began to abate as the flight took on the aspects of a milk run. That was the time to be doubly alert, Mart said.

Ed shared a shift with a cadet named Sam Urkos. Sam was a small, wiry type, always in motion, with a store of nervous energy that never ran down. He was highly competent in navigation. But Ed hated working with him. Sam never talked of anything but the Pacer.

"I've got it figured," Sam said. "I know why they put the Pacer in with us. A corpsman can't be the cold, unemotional fish he is often pictured. He's got to have something to fight. The Pacer is something to hate and to fight."

"You're wasting your time," said Ed. "Do your job. That's all that counts."

"No it isn't! No matter how good you are, there's that robot up ahead of you, laughing at the best you can do, because he can do better."

"If that's true, maybe they should build a corps out of Pacers."

"Maybe they're considering just that," said Sam bitterly. "How would you like that, being replaced in the corps by a lousy robot?"

Ed shrugged and started to walk away. Sam stopped him. "I want you to come to my quarters in an hour. We've got something that will interest you. Will you be there?"

"Who are the 'we' you are talking about?"

"Just a few of the other boys who have some ideas about the Pacer."

"I don't know. I'll think about it."

"Think real hard," said Sam. "Frankly, we need your

help, and we're going to have to get that help one way or another."

Ed wanted nothing to do with it. But he didn't like Sam Urkos' approach nor his half threat. It looked like something he ought to find out about.

When he appeared a little late at Sam's quarters Sam opened the door cautiously. "I began to get worried that you might not come."

"I decided I'd better find out what you idiots are up to."

"You'll have a better opinion when you see what we've got."

Ed crowded in and Sam shut the door. There were about twenty other cadets sitting on the floor, leaning against the walls, and in the doorways. Ed nodded recognition. These were the most rabid ones, who swore the Pacer had to be found.

Ed shook his head in disgust. "All you guys wasting time plotting how to find the Pacer when you ought to be cramming for next duty shift and sacking out to keep your brains alive."

"Nothing counts if we don't locate that Pacer," said a burly cadet named Rex Farnham. "You never heard of a class that didn't go down the tubes if they failed to find the Pacer."

"I never heard anything about it at all," said Ed. "You're wasting time you need to spend on the mission."

"This *is* the mission," said Sam. "Do you think we're out here to run navigation problems and analyze stars? We've done all that before. We're here for just one thing, to find out if we're smart enough to identify the Pacer. That's the mission."

"You're all crazy."

"Maybe so, but here's something that will interest you." Sam pulled out a computer printout and laid it on the table in the center of the room.

Ed looked at its unintelligible data. "What's that supposed to tell me?"

"We set up a program. We threw in all the data on every cadet in the class—"

"You haven't got access to that."

"Perkins works in personnel. He got it. We threw in everything that's happened in the past six years, factored for sociological responses."

"And you got the name of Commander Turner's mascot dog."

"Uh-uh. We got the name of the Pacer."

"And it turned out to be Sam Urkos."

"It turned out to be one you know much better. Mart Adams."

Ed stared at Sam's grinning visage. His eyes went slowly to the others in the group. They were grinning, too. Ominously, viciously, like a ring of wolves around a fallen comrade.

Ed exhaled deeply. "You're all crazier than I thought."

"It figures, doesn't it?" said Sam. "Who in the whole class cares less about finding the Pacer than Mart Adams? Naturally, the Pacer would like to suppress any efforts to find him.

"And who is way out on top in the greatest number of subjects? Mart Adams can outstrip us in about anything you can name. He's the best mathematician in light-years. He lets Michaelis stand just a little ahead of him in navigation, and Thornton a little ahead in celestial mechanics. Who's the guy most cadets try to

outdistance? We ran a little survey on that question. Guess who it is."

Ed sucked in his breath deeply again. "There's no more human guy aboard this ship than Mart Adams."

"Right again," said Sam. "They'll probably design the next Pacer so it won't be quite so human. They overdid it on Mart Adams."

"Okay, so why did you bring me in? You know I'll never believe Mart Adams is the Pacer. I'll fight every one of you to defend him. You know the first thing I'll do when I get out of here is tell him you're gunning for him."

"Of course," said Sam smoothly. "We know all that. And we don't want to make a mistake. We want to be absolutely sure we've nailed the Pacer. If we can convince you, then we can be pretty sure, can't we?"

"How are you going to do that?"

"We need added confirmation to the computer analysis. We want you to get it for us."

"How?"

"Skin. Nail parings. Hair. Blood—he must cut himself when he shaves once in a while. Saliva. Feces. Urine. Any body sampling you can possibly obtain. There's always a cellular weakness, a fault built into one of these things so they can be detected. It's a kind of game, see? But we want to be sure. Analysis of body samples will tell us.

"So if you help us and we're wrong, you'll just be proving your own position. And if we're right it won't make any difference to you, will it? If he's the Pacer, Mart Adams will mean nothing to you."

It meant time, Ed thought. Time to think. Time to plan. Time to warn Mart to protect himself.

"All right," he said finally, "just to prove what jackasses you are."

They were still grinning when he left.

Hell days began during the following shift. Ed was on his sleeping schedule and learned of it only when Mart appeared at the end of that shift and Ed was ready to go on.

"You look like the roof fell in," said Ed. "Something happen?"

Mart gave a twisted smile. "You might say that's exactly what did happen. We've been skirting an area of collapsed space that didn't show on the sensors until last shift. Navigation had us drilled right into it. By now we'd have been a few million hydrogen atoms, well dispersed through a few solar systems if we had run into it any deeper. As it is, we've distorted a good deal of our instrumentation and some of the power drive. We don't know how bad it is yet."

"That sounds like the real thing. It isn't a simulation problem, is it?"

Mart shook his head. Simulation problems were injected by the computer to give the cadets exercise in countering emergencies. "This is the real thing, all right. I hope they don't throw any simulation on top of it. We aren't out of the woods by any means.

"We've run into some queer stuff in the analysis group. One globular cluster seems to be made out of something we've never encountered before. Electromagnetic radiation misbehaves."

"Has the navigation been straightened out, or are there still problems?" Ed was concerned about what he faced on the coming shift.

"You'll still have problems. We've changed course, but this collapsed area is ragged. We may have to change some more."

It wasn't as bad on Ed's shift as it might have been. His predecessors had taken care of most of the problem to avoid the presently known hazards. If things remained this smooth, programed simulations of problems could be interjected by the computer at any time.

Through the shift, Ed forced out of his mind all thoughts of Sam Urkos and his crowd. But as the shift came to an end and he returned to quarters he thought of their demands and accusations. Somebody had to be the Pacer, that was certain. But it wasn't Mart. You don't live with another person for four long years without learning whether he's human or robot. There were some cold fish in the class. Thornton and Michaelis were among these. Either of them was a more likely possibility as the Pacer than Mart was.

Ed had decided, however, to get Sam the samples he wanted to prove Mart was not the Pacer. He examined the bathroom fixtures carefully with a magnifying glass. Mart was meticulous; it wasn't going to be easy. With a higher-power glass, however, Ed was able to find what he needed. There were microscopic bits of skin on the razor. A nail paring had caught in the rug under the bunk. There was a dot of blood on a face towel in the laundry. One by one, he packaged the samples he needed for the laboratory analysis.

He took the samples to Sam. "This should convince you the idiot computer is wrong."

"No chance," said Sam. "We just want confirmation, that's all." Sam looked suddenly suspicious. "You

wouldn't have faked these by giving your own or someone else's, would you?"

"I want to prove Mart is not the Pacer. You'll find the proof there."

Two days later, Sam approached Ed. "The results were all negative. Our lab people found all the samples definitely human."

"That proves it. You're on the wrong track."

Sam shook his head. "The computer decision is not wrong. We need some more samples for a recheck."

Ed swore in rage. "You could cut up every cell in Mart Adams' body and not find anything different. I'm not getting any more samples for you. I'm alerting Mart, and you and your gang better stay a long way from our quarters or we'll come out shooting."

"All the rest of the class is on our side. You'll only get yourself hurt if you defend the Pacer."

Ed thought desperately. If Sam convinced the majority of the other cadets that Mart was the Pacer anything could happen. "Wait a minute," he said. "It's said that a Pacer simply cannot reproduce itself. You agree?"

"Correct." Sam nodded.

"Mart Adams has a baby girl back home."

"Faked—just like all family relationships of a Pacer."

Ed suppressed his fury. "Mart carries a lock of the baby's hair. You match it against Mart's cell pattern and you'll find he's the parent."

"I'm not sure we can do it from hair, but we'll look at it. Can you get a sample?"

Why should he bother? Ed thought angrily. This was barbaric. He had never realized the full implications of the Pacer's presence before. Why did the fathers of the

academy allow such a thing to happen? How many other innocent persons like Mart Adams had been attacked and perhaps killed while the Pacer went undetected? What was the purpose of it all? This wasn't training; it was harassment and torture.

Suppose he went to the officers of the ship, Ed wondered. Would they take any action to protect Mart Adams? He doubted it. They openly permitted this game of Hunt-the-Pacer.

Maybe it was supposed to simulate warfare. Ed didn't know. He was suddenly and enormously weary. And disillusioned, he thought. This couldn't be happening on a training cruise of the academy.

But it was.

It took him two more shifts to get a few strands of baby hair from the lock that Mart carried in his wallet. It was risky. If Mart had caught him he could only have assumed Ed was stealing.

Ed hoped the sample of hair would stall Sam Urkos until the Pacer was found. But it didn't gain much time. Sam called him. "This hair doesn't tell us anything. We can't tell from the structure of the dead cells of a hair whether it's related to a given parent or not."

"So you still don't know anything except that Mart Adams is completely human."

"Yes we do." Sam gestured to a printout on the table. "That's from a new computer program, based solely on social and competitive relationships within the class of cadets. It leaves absolutely no doubt. Mart Adams is it. He stands way out from any other potential Pacer."

"The computer's lying to you because you lied to it.

You can't get anything out except what you put in, and you put in your own bias that Mart is the Pacer."

"What is it to you if one robot gets scrubbed? The class has to accomplish its mission."

"Then get yourself ready for war, because that's what you're going to get," said Ed fiercely.

Sam hesitated. "Do you think the commander will tolerate your defending the Pacer?"

"Apparently anything will be tolerated—if the officers will allow this witch-hunt to go on right under their noses. But you're not going to get Mart Adams!"

During that shift a navigational inaccuracy sent the *Robert Goddard* through a fringe of collapsed space. It was tenuous enough to not trip the sensors, but the resulting spatial distortions in the molecular circuitry of the computers wiped out 90 per cent of the computer capacity. The *Robert Goddard* bore through space at 90 c, blind and directionless.

Commander Turner called all cadets and officers and crewmen not on watch to the assembly room. "I do not know what you have heard or surmised about our situation," he said. "Briefly, our computer capacity has been virtually destroyed. The molecular components have been so distorted that they no longer function.

"We are already rebuilding the damaged units with spare parts, but even these were affected by the accident. We are also slowing our velocity with the objective of backtracking our outward path. You are all aware, however, how much deviation can result from only a few seconds of arc of error in our bearing at cruise velocity. Our situation, gentlemen, is critical. We face the possibility of being unable to locate a homeward course.

"That does not mean, however, that the training objectives of this cruise are abandoned. On the contrary, they will be maintained for as long as we continue to exist as an operating unit. Current duty assignments, disciplines, and objectives remain.

"One exception to duty assignments will be made, however. We need one man to attempt to substitute for the navigational computer as closely as humanly possible. We recognize, of course, that this will not be very close. But there is a slim hope of attaining a homeward course if we maintain the computations necessary to identify our present course and reverse it when the time comes that we are able to do so. I want a volunteer—or volunteers—to attempt to take over essential computational work manually until we are able to establish a functional computer once more."

A single thought went through the mind of every man present. Only the Pacer was capable of a task such as this. And the act of volunteering would be a dead giveaway.

Mart Adams was on his feet. Ed Renny caught his breath. And nearly two hundred others gasped with mingled surprise, satisfaction, or dismay.

"I believe I could perform the duties referred to, sir," Mart said.

"Thank you, Mr. Adams," said the commander. "Please take your post at once."

In spite of the commander's declaration, half of the cadets refused to believe the emergency was anything but one of the programed simulations that were part of the cruise program. Some of them considered it a deliberate means to smoke out the Pacer.

But whether it was real or a simulation, everyone

agreed that the problem was obviously in good hands. It was estimated that Mart Adams—as the Pacer—had a built-in computing capacity that was probably close to that of the damaged main computer.

The only dissatisfaction was with the paradox that, although they now knew who the Pacer was, they could not take steps to destroy it. The Pacer was under the protection of the ship's officers. And, if they were to believe the official statement of the situation, the Pacer was now essential to their survival.

Sam Urkos came to the quarters of Ed and Mart at the end of the next shift. "I guess we had a pretty good computer program to spot the Pacer, didn't we?"

"Get out," said Ed quietly.

"I can't figure you out, Renny," said Sam. "You know now that Mart Adams is nothing but a manufactured piece of equipment, like any other electronic gear aboard this ship. Yet you still act like it's a human being. You're a crazy fool. I don't see how you ever made it this far."

Ed hurled his weight against the grinning Urkos and smashed him against the door. Ed opened the door and jerked Sam's legs about and tumbled him into the hall. "Don't ever come back this way again," he warned.

They'd get him when he finished his work in the navigation center. They'd be waiting for him to come out. Mart must know they'd be there, Ed thought. He must know now that he was a robot, the Pacer. But he still had the built-in desire of every human to live. He had a wife he loved, and a baby he loved and thought to be his own.

Ed swore and bashed his fist against the table. Robot

or not, Mart Adams had the right to his continued existence.

The *Robert Goddard* continued to bore through the night of space. By manual navigation now it pierced thickly populated regions of the galaxy. Even its FTL velocity would not take it beyond the limits of the home galaxy, of course. In intergalactic space the problem would be easier because there would be few gravitational fields to dodge. But only the newest of the supercruisers with velocities up to 10,000 c could venture beyond the galaxy in any reasonable time.

Technical crews worked around the clock repairing the main computer banks. But the damage was enormous. They might almost as well build a computer from the ground up. And finally, after two shifts of frustrating effort, they decided to do just that. About a million and a half microtabs were available in spares and salvageable components. With these, the crew proceeded to put together a simplified unit that would serve the sole purpose of getting them on a home course. All other functions normally handled by the computer would be put on manual operation, to be carried out by instructors and cadets.

At the chief computerman's desk Mart Adams sat steadily, absorbing data from a thousand factors of the ship's course, making mental calculations of its path in three dimensions, recording on manual machines the deviations caused by ten thousand gravitational fields, the variables in the ship's own engines, the light pressure of suns by which it soared, the deceleration which was slowly dragging the ship to a halt so that it might take a return course.

It was obvious only the Pacer could perform such a task.

There was grudging admiration that even a machine could be built to function so. To wear the mask of a human being—almost undetectable—and to function with abilities rivaling the capacities of the ship's main computer—the cadets had to consciously remind themselves that the admiration was due the designers and builders of the Pacer, not for the machine that they had made.

After three shifts, Mart Adams took a short break, but he didn't leave navigation center. There was irritation when it was learned he was taking a break. There was no need to carry the pretense of a human being any longer. A machine didn't need a break. Time was being wasted. Time that might make the difference between finding their way back or not.

By the end of two more shifts, the velocity of the ship had been lowered to less than 1 c. The critical 1-c level had been crossed, with its traumatic sensory distortions. In a few more hours the turnaround could occur.

Ed was on his bunk, his eyes closed, recovering from the nausea of the 1-c crossover, when the comm box rattled and his name was spoken.

"Cadet Renny," he answered.

"Requesting you to report for special duty," the operator said. "Report to navigation central."

Ed nodded. He checked his uniform and swallowed another pill to kill the crossover nausea. He left the room, wondering what they wanted of him in navigation.

The officer in charge nodded as Ed saluted on entering the central. "Adams has about had it," said the officer. "He requested you join and give him a hand."

"I don't know how I can be of help," said Ed, "but I'll do anything I can."

"See Adams."

Ed took a station next to Mart. Mart looked up at him with eyes deadened by fatigue. He smiled wanly. "Welcome aboard, Ed. I need you. I've about had it."

It must be a built-in fatigue response, Ed thought. Surely it could be turned off for situations of this kind, but there probably was no Pacer technician aboard the ship.

Ed couldn't think of Mart as mere mechanism, however. He felt a wave of empathy for his long-time friend. "What can I do to help, Mart? I'm not that good at this kind of stuff."

"Yes you are. You can take a segment of these equations and process them as the factors alter. You're as good as I am, only you won't let yourself believe it."

Ed hesitated. "Mart—they know you're the Pacer—"

"They do?" Mart smiled. "Whatever gave them that idea?"

"This. They know it couldn't have been done by anyone but the Pacer."

"Then I guess I shouldn't have volunteered to save their bloody necks, should I? I should have held back, like the rest of them, and let the ship just go on and be lost."

"They aren't going to get you. I told them that. I've got a gun, and I brought one for you, too."

Mart smiled crookedly again. "I'm just a machine, remember? Artificial bio-cells. Implanted memory dreamed up by some clerk back in the academy. I'm nothing, Ed. There's no use risking your neck for nothing."

"Shut up, Mart. I know your life is as real to you as mine is to me. If they get you, they'll have to get both of us." His face lit with sudden inspiration. "Listen—why didn't we think of it before? We'll bargain with them—if they don't lay off and guarantee us safety we'll bollix up the navigation so they won't ever have a chance of finding earth again."

"I already thought of it," said Mart. "I could have done that when I volunteered. But you're forgetting one thing. We're still corps cadets. That isn't the way the corps does things."

Ed snorted. "Is what they're doing to us the way the corps does things?"

"I'm not sure," said Mart. "I'm just not sure. There are some things I don't understand."

Ed Renny was light-years behind Mart Adams, but somehow he seemed to catch up slowly as the shift progressed and merged into another. There seemed to be some kind of fire in Mart Adams that encompassed Ed and brought out speed and abilities he never knew he had. He raced faster and faster to catch the impossible vision in Mart Adams, and somehow he seemed to draw nearer to it.

And then suddenly the dead lights on the panel before them came to life, and the printers began to move.

"They've got it fixed," said Mart wearily. "The computer's on line again." He punched a score of buttons, feeding the tapes of his own manual computations into the computer banks. "We can go now," he said.

Ed removed his hands from his own keyboard and slumped momentarily in the chair. But they couldn't afford to rest now. They had to make it to their own

quarters. There, perhaps, they could hole up and refuse to come out without a guarantee of safe conduct from the ship's officers. He didn't know what this would get him. He'd never heard of anyone defending a Pacer before. Probably it would lose him all chance of a career in the corps. If that was it, so be it.

He wasn't going to abandon Mart Adams at any cost.

"Here's the gun," he said to Mart. He slipped him the weapon unnoticed. Possession aboard ship would be certain court-martial, yet surely they had a right to defend themselves against the cadets who would attack Mart.

The navigation officers were engrossed in the duties of getting the ship checked out on course once more. No one paid any attention as Ed and Mart rose from their stations and made their way to the door.

In the hallway a cluster of cadets was gathered at the far end. Ed and Mart had to go through them to reach their own quarters.

At the sight of the pair the group roared. They advanced with gleeful viciousness, eyes upon Mart Adams. Sam Urkos was in the lead. "Get back!" he demanded of Ed. "This has nothing to do with you. You're going to get hurt if you get mixed up in it."

Ed drew his gun. "We're coming through. Come past us one at a time and don't try anything. I'm going to kill the first man that sticks out a hand."

Sam's eyes widened incredulously. "Ed, you fool! What are you doing this for? It's part of the game. It's been going on for a hundred years. We have to get rid of the Pacer. We can never call ourselves officers of the corps unless we do."

"It's time for a change," said Ed. "This Pacer has

earned the right to survive. If you get him you've got to get me, too. And that's murder. Will you be able to call yourselves officers of the corps then?"

Sam's eyes narrowed. His mouth became a tight line. He leaped forward.

Ed fired the gun.

The ship's speaker roared. "Attention all cadets! This is the commander. Training operations are declared ended. Report in twenty minutes for pinning ceremonies!"

Mart Adams adjusted his uniform in front of the mirror. His eyes were still tired, but he was refreshed after a shave and shower. His smile was amused now. "I wonder if they ever pinned a Pacer before? Maybe I just ought to stay away."

"Maybe it'll do something to the whole lousy system," Ed said. "This Pacer idea is crazy. I wonder who ever thought up the idea of putting one in the cadet classes, anyway?"

"Well—if they hadn't, I wouldn't be here."

Ed had no answer. He didn't understand anything, he thought. He didn't understand the corps. He didn't understand Mart Adams, a machine that had more life than most men. He didn't understand himself.

He just didn't understand what it was all about.

There was discipline in the assembly chamber. The cadets stood stiffly as their numbers appeared, one by one. But they choked back their exclamations with difficulty as Mart Adams strode to his place in alphabetical order at the head of the group.

The commander appeared, and they saluted stiffly

and sang the academy song and sat down. Commander Turner appeared at ease—far more so than his seconds in command, who sat stiffly behind him.

"We are on the way home," said the commander. "We are no longer lost in space. With normal good luck and the expert performance of duties by all of you we will make it safely to home base. This would not have been the case, however, without some exceptional performance by some of the ship's personnel. The destruction of the computers was not a programed perturbation, as some of you have continued to believe. It was a genuine emergency, and one that destroyed for a time our ability to find our way home.

"That we are again on a known course is due entirely to the skills of one man. I am proud to commission first, with highest honors and commendations, Cadet Martin Adams."

Normally, there would have been an explosion of approving applause. Mart walked to the platform amid dead silence. The assembly of cadets did not understand, could not believe, that a Pacer was being commissioned an officer of the corps.

Commander Turner smiled at Mart Adams, saluted, and pinned the coveted fins to Mart's coat. Then he saluted once more and shook hands. Mart smiled wanly and thanked the commander and returned to his seat.

"There is a tradition," the commander said, "that the academy installs in every class a Pacer, which is supposed to be for the purpose of inciting cadets to compete to the limits of their abilities. The origin of this tradition goes back almost a century, at which time it was started by a group of cadets who are said to have built a robot and put it in the class to deceive the instructors into

believing there was one more classman than there actually was. The instructors, of course, found out about it and allowed it to continue until the very time of graduation, when they ordered the cadets to destroy the robot. By then some of the cadets had become so attached to their mechanical classmate that they refused. For this, they were denied commissions. That's how the tradition got started. We encourage its continuance."

Commander Turner paused and glanced down at Mart Adams. "Each class comes to the conclusion that the best man in the class is the Pacer. And so you have chosen Lieutenant Adams as your Pacer. A great honor.

"Some of you tolerate a Pacer easily; you just don't care whether there is one or not. Some of you believe the superstition that the Pacer must be found and destroyed before you are commissioned. Some of you expend enormous amounts of energy analyzing, checking, testing, composing computer programs to determine who is the Pacer.

"The tradition is quite true. You must find and destroy the Pacer before you become officers of the corps. Your only problem is where you look for the Pacer. Some of you have, indeed, failed to find and destroy it, and for this you will not be commissioned.

"The Pacer is not Mart Adams—"

Discipline failed for a brief moment as a murmur of dismay and confusion arose from some of the cadets.

"I say the Pacer is not Mart Adams. There is no mechanical man in your midst. Lieutenant Adams is the same as any of you—or the same as you should be, at any rate. He is a live, ambitious, skillful human being who believes the stars are his and there is no limit to his

potential. He found his Pacer and destroyed it long ago —or perhaps he never had one.

"This is what each of you needs do. Some have done it; some have not. Find and kill the Pacer. Destroy whatever it is that determines the limits of your own potential and achievement. You first have to learn the Pacer is not out there—outside your own skin. He's inside. Within each of you is your own Pacer, setting your own limits. When you kill your Pacer, when you move the limits out to infinity, then you can be officers of the corps.

"Many of you learned this during the past six years. All our efforts have been to bring you to this point. The techniques, the mechanics, the sciences we have taught you, the discipline we have instilled within you —all these are secondary to the one thing: to cause you to kill your own Pacer.

"We owe a great debt to that first class that built a mechanical man and tried to pass it off as a student cadet. It turned out to be the greatest training device the corps has ever found.

"And now, may we have a round of applause for Lieutenant Adams?"

The room roared.

Ed Renny roared too, but he felt like crying.

Especially when he was called up next for second honors in the graduating class.

And Sam Urkos heard it all, piped in from the assembly chamber to the speaker beside his bed in sick bay. He moved painfully, twisting the gunshot wound, as he writhed in involuntary protest to the words he could scarcely believe he was hearing.

He spoke aloud to the room that was empty except

for himself. "The computer identified Martin Adams as the Pacer, with no margin of error. And they didn't even believe the computer! How could they doubt? How could they doubt the computer?"

He turned his face to the wall, and his shoulders shook with sobs of disbelief.

THE GIFT

by Chad Oliver

The swollen white sun drifted slowly down toward the horizon, more than eleven light-years from earth. Long black shadows striped the land. The shadows seemed alive, shifting with the strong winds that blew through the undulating grasses and stunted trees of the fifth planet of the Procyon system.

On that vast windswept plain that stretched away to encircling mountains of naked rock, creatures moved. There were squat and heavy-footed grass-eaters, walking slowly in dense defensive clusters. There were sleek, cat-like carnivores, drinkers of the wind, prowling in pairs waiting for the night.

And there were manlike things that could not have been mistaken for men. Hairy they were, with long and powerful arms. They crouched around tiny fires in crude pithouses: round holes dug into the ground and roofed with branches and mud. They worked on their hunting

were clasped as though in prayer. Her head, framed by a cloud of long unfashionable blond hair that seemed to glow in the torchlight, was tilted back. She was staring intently up at the high underside of the dome.

Pretty corny, Lee thought. Just the same, it was effective.

"Citizens!" Edson Hewitt boomed in his deep, stentorian voice. "It is not too late for men of good will. You must have faith!"

"Faith," chanted the crowd, right on cue.

"The ship will come!" Edson Hewitt lifted his skeletal arms in supplication. "The ship will come again, but it is not enough just to wait and hope. We have had enough of waiting! We must take action!"

"Action," echoed the crowd.

"There is no limit to the power of the human mind. There is no barrier that can stand against its force. No, my friends, the light-years are as nothing! We must *project* the purity of our thought. We will be heard! There will be an answer!"

"Answer."

"The ship will come again. It may be out there now, out in the great darkness, listening. We must put aside all evil things. We must cleanse ourselves. We must be worthy. We must project, project, project! And we must do it together!"

"Together!"

There was more, much more, in the same vein. The man's presence was hypnotic; the people in the Square were like puppets, desperate to believe. The woman in the white gown never moved, staring up and out with blank and lovely eyes. The torches hissed at the plat-

form corners; they were like the jets of a ship, pushing out orange columns of flame . . .

Lee wanted to let himself go, wanted to be caught up in it all, to be *part* of it. Something in him yearned to surrender, to float, to be absorbed. But he could not believe. There was a wall in him that would not break. Behind that wall, he knew that he needed something he had not yet found. He did not know what that something was, but he knew that Edson Hewitt wasn't it.

"Join hands, citizens! Touch! The time has come!"

"Come!"

Lee was startled as hands sought his. He found himself clasped by an old man on his right; the hand was frail and dry like a wad of long-dead skin. A woman—no longer young, but not yet old—caught his left hand. Her palm was moist and strong. Her fingers contracted convulsively. There seemed to be an irregularity in her hand, a patch of different texture, a small object—

Lee kept looking straight ahead. His own palms began to sweat. He had lost his anonymity; he might be remembered. Of course, the meeting was not really illegal; free speech was still protected in the Colony. It would have been impossible to hold a large clandestine meeting anywhere in the Colony, especially not in the Square. There were no secrets in this world. Still, an activity can be forbidden whether it is illegal or not. Young people were supposed to stay in their homes during the night hours. His father had expressly warned him about attending this gathering. Old John Melner had strong opinions about Edson Hewitt . . .

"Now! Project! The ship will come! Make it aware!"

"Aware!"

The torches flared higher. There was a scent like perfume, a sweetness that animated the still air. Moans came from the crowd.

A man quite close to Lee began to babble. The sounds that came from his mouth resembled words, but the language was unknown to Lee. In the dancing torchlight, Lee saw flecks of white foam on his lips. A woman fainted. She sank to her knees and was kept from falling by those who held her hands. Somewhere, there was a cry of anguish, then sobbing.

The torches brightened into a final blinding flash. With an abruptness that was shocking, they went out. There was only the steady pale light of the city. Edson Hewitt and the blond woman in the white gown were gone.

The ceremony was over.

Lee disengaged his right hand; the old man simply stood where he was, whimpering softly. The woman on his left had vanished.

Lee became conscious of something sticking to the palm of his left hand.

An irregularity, a small object—

He closed his fist around it.

He turned and ran.

Old John Melner glanced at his watch. He lifted his thin hand and stroked his thatch of fine white hair. He noticed that his hand was trembling slightly. He felt the weight of his years.

"Give him another thirty minutes to be on the safe side," he said. His voice was steady, but it took an effort. "Then I'll go home."

"Are you sure it worked?" Dana Bigelow paced nerv-

ously back and forth across the sparsely furnished antiseptic room. His back was bent; Dana was in constant low-level pain.

John Melner shrugged and settled himself in his chair. Dana's fretfulness always made him try to relax; it was like an antidote. "I know my son. Lee knew about the meeting. I was carefully not at home. My wife was conspicuously asleep. So Lee went to hear Edson Hewitt pour out his garbage. He couldn't possibly stay away—don't you remember when you were seventeen years old?"

"No," said Dana Bigelow.

"*I* do. I would have gone just to look at the blonde. Lee is no different; he's a good boy. Okay. I know Paula, too. She found him, just as she was supposed to do. She found him if she had to crawl through that crowd. So Lee has got the note, and he got it under suitably dramatic circumstances. He'll take it from there, or I have terribly misjudged my son."

Dana Bigelow continued to pace. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing? We're taking an awful chance. The computers can't figure all the variables. I'm worried about Lee, even if it works. And I just don't know about us—"

John Melner scowled. He looked formidable despite his age; the man had a will that had grown stronger with the years. "*We* don't have a vast amount to lose, you and I. In any case, the threat to us—and to the Colony—is minimal. As for Lee, *of course* we can't be sure we're doing the right thing. That's the trouble with us, anyway—we always have to be so *sure*. The only certainty, my friend, is death—and that's about what we've got here. The time has come to take a chance or

two. We can't take it; we're too old, too set in our ways, too secure. We value our security too highly, miserable as it is. That's a penalty of age. Lee is different: he's young, dammit, and full of juice and crazy romantic dreams. Lee suffers from the disease of youth—he thinks he's immortal, that agony can never touch him, that the world can be changed. Okay; that's what we need. You say you are worried about Lee. So am I—worried if he stays, worried if he goes. Lee is my son, remember? My only son, and a son that came late in life. That's my answer to you, Dana. If he knew the whole story, do you doubt which choice *he* would make?"

Dana Bigelow stopped pacing. His eyes flashed from beneath his bushy brows. "I know what he would do. That's not the point. By definition, the young lack experience. They have no basis on which to judge. It's up to us to protect them."

"Protect them from what? From life? What do all our experiences amount to? Have they been all that salutary? Dana, we're a bunch of zombies living in a glass cage. What kind of record is that?"

"The Colony has survived. We're alive."

"Are we? It's a matter of definition. Anyway, we're two old men locked in a senile argument. The thing is done. The decision has been made. What we have to do now is get out of the way and let it happen."

"You're very confident."

"No, not that. Call it by another name."

Old John Melner sat quietly then, looking at nothing, waiting to go home.

Lee Melner ran back through the pale streets of the city. His face was flushed with excitement. He felt like

a fugitive, although he could not believe that he had done anything really wrong. He did not look at the object clutched in his hand.

His home was a unit in a housing complex not far from the edge of the Colony; the great dome was closer to him now, starting its downward curve to meet the ground and form the seal of the city wall. The apartment was substantial, occupying three levels of the eight-story building, but from the street it was indistinguishable from the other units. There was, of course, no yard. The only grass and the only trees in the Colony grew in a tiny park not far from the Square. Sometimes—three times since Lee had been alive—flowers grew there.

He slipped the object into his pocket and pressed the combination of the door. The door hissed open. Lee moved inside, trying to control his harsh breathing. The house was silent; the lights were on as always in the lower level. He glanced at the familiar room. It was large and had a kind of warmth that came from long acquaintance. At the same time, there was almost nothing in it that was unusual or unique. There were no paintings, no books, no curious oddments of furniture. Everything had been made in the Colony, mass-produced by singularly unimaginative machines.

Everything but one item.

In the center of the room, on a stand protected by a plastic cover, there was an empty glass jar that had once held instant coffee. It had a faded red label on it with yellow lettering. It still had a lid.

It had come from earth.

It was more than an antique. It was something from

a now unreachable world that seemed sometimes to be a dream.

It was priceless.

Lee activated the field lift that carried him silently to the third level. He did not pause at the second floor; he assumed that his mother was still asleep. If she had awakened, or if his father had returned and found him gone—

Well, he would soon know.

He stepped out into his room. He had no brothers or sisters; hardly anyone did. The third level was his alone.

Everything was exactly as he had left it. The bed was rumpled with pillows under the warmer to look—hopefully—like a sleeping body. His desk was neat and clean, the computer terminals off. The photograph of Ellen was on the stand by the bed, as always. The globe of earth glowed softly in the corner: deep blue and gentle green and rich brown. It was nothing like the world he knew.

Lee shrugged off his clothes and put on his sleeping tunic. He rearranged the pillows and switched off the overhead lights. He dug into the pocket of his discarded clothing and felt the small wadded object.

He carried it into the bed with him.

Carefully, trying to control the shaking of his hands, he unfolded the packet and smoothed it out. As he had suspected—indeed, known with a certainty that left no room for doubt—it was a message.

He examined it in the faint illumination of the bedlight.

The note read:

Lee, you have been chosen. Your selection has involved years of study and analysis. We have chosen you

because we know that you can be trusted and because your personality profile shows that you can succeed.

Much depends on you. Much has been kept from you. There has been no word from earth for thirty-five terrestrial years. Earth may no longer exist. The ships will never come.

You have your life before you. If you wish to live as others have lived, huddled in fear in this Colony prison and waiting for extinction, disregard this message.

If you want more than that—if you have the courage to follow your heart—you have only to act.

Lee, there is another world out there, beyond the Colony dome. It is waiting for us. The air is good, the white sun shines, the strong winds blow. There are people out there. Not people like us, but they are humanoid. They have not forgotten how to laugh and how to dream. We have much to offer them. They have more to offer us. One man can make the contact, if he is the right man.

There is a way out, contrary to what you have been taught. In addition to the main lock, there is a small emergency exit. It is simple to operate, from both the inside and the outside. The directions are engraved in a panel just to the left of the exit.

There is always danger in the unknown. You must be aware of this when you make your choice. If you choose not to go, you will live in comfort and security. You must decide whether that is all you want.

We will not contact you again if you stay in the Colony. If you do go Outside, and if you do not fail, you will be contacted by someone you know.

You will be the first. Remember that. Our trust in you is great.

Go to the house of Gilbert McAllister on the edge of

the Colony not far from your home. The house is empty now. The door combination has been altered so that it is the same as your own. The lift in the main chamber on what appears to be the bottom floor will go DOWN *if you press the control marked* EMERGENCY. *It will take you to the exit.*

The rest is up to you, Lee.

Good luck from all of us.

The message was unsigned.

Lee got up, concealed the refolded packet in his desk, and returned to bed.

He switched off the bed light.

Lee Melner never closed his eyes that night, but he dreamed many dreams.

Although it seemed an eternity, it actually took him two months to make up his mind.

He went many times to the house of Gilbert McAllister. Twice, he checked the combination on the door. It worked, and he found that he was not surprised. He did not go in.

He lived in a state of constant turmoil. Outwardly, he was calm enough; he sleepwalked through the set routines of his gray life. Inwardly, he was seething. He could not think and yet his mind was racing. He ached to tell someone, share what he knew. He came very close to taking Ellen into his confidence. Something made him hold back; he was afraid to involve her.

Not yet, not yet.

Long before he was aware that he had made a final decision, Lee caught himself making plans. This time would be safe; that time would not. What to wear, what

to take. How to carry food and water. Whether or not to leave a message in case he did not return . . .

A night came. He could not sleep. That day there had been rain Outside; he had seen the sheets of water washing across the dome. That night, as he lay in his bed, he heard the distant roar of thunder. It was the third time in his life that he had heard it. He shivered and his heart pounded. He knew that he had to go.

A week later, he went.

Very early in the morning, while the Colony slept, Lee returned to the house of Gilbert McAllister. He pressed the combination and the familiar door whispered open.

He stepped inside, and the door closed behind him. The house was nothing special—a unit like all the others. It was neat and clean and had an empty smell about it.

He moved through the pale interior illumination and located the lift. There was a small switch on the bottom of the control panel. It was clearly marked: EMERGENCY. DO NOT TOUCH.

He threw the switch.

The lift went down. It went farther than he had expected, and then stopped.

He was in a large, barren chamber. The walls and floor and ceiling were all a muted brown. There was nothing in the room. There was no sound except for a gentle hissing from the air vents. The room was a little cold.

A sealed airlock portal was set flush into the wall that was closest to the edge of the dome. It was not large—just big enough to admit two men at once—but it was

the same general type as the huge main lock that Lee had seen many times.

There was a panel just to the left of the lock. When Lee stepped in front of it, a red warning light appeared. Words flashed on the panel: DANGER. THIS IS AN EMERGENCY EXIT. DO NOT OPEN WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION.

The directions were engraved on the panel.

The instructions were not complicated.

Lee took a deep breath and activated the lock.

John Melner sat with his head in his hands. He was desperately afraid. He could not lie to himself. The ultimate responsibility was his.

"Lee never had a chance," he said. His voice was tired and barely audible. "The message was too calculated. He was an iron filing drawn to a magnet, a starving man moving toward food. We made the decision for him."

Dana Bigelow paced as always, his face a frozen mask. "We have switched roles, John. It is futile to blame yourself for what had to be done. The thing may work, you know. I have every confidence in Lee. His prognosis is strong."

"Yes, but we *manipulated* him."

"We had to. The Colony is staring down a dead-end tunnel. We are stagnant, static, afraid to act. *We* know what the problem is and what caused it. We were abandoned here; God knows why. We were dumped and left. We found ourselves on an alien world and none of the fancy plans were ever implemented. We knew how to survive: stay put, don't make waves, don't take chances. We had it drilled into us. It was all we knew. We were too infernally wise and experienced to break out of the

shell. We needed something we did not have. We needed a man of action . . ."

"We needed a hero," John Melner said quietly. "A quaint, old-fashioned primordial hero. A bringer of fire, a slayer of dragons, an opener of the way. A man who ignored the odds, took the long chance, welcomed a challenge. A dreamer, a doer, a man of impulse. In short, a *young* man whose mind was not too cluttered up with the knowledge of what he couldn't or shouldn't do. We had the young man. We worked on him a little, but basically he was what he was. We provided the *opportunity*. It is the situation that creates the hero—or breaks him. We set it up. We baited the trap."

"There was no alternative. Most of us exist in a kind of paralysis of routine. We worship order because it has kept us alive. The rest of us—Edson Hewitt and his cape-flapping friends—have retreated into sheer ceremonialism and mystical flapdoodle. Harmless, maybe, but it won't get us anywhere. We had to *try*. If we didn't, we wouldn't last more than a generation or two. We'll just curl up in a ball and whimper ourselves to death."

"But he's my son, Dana. Logic won't help me now —and it won't help him. The world out there is tougher than Lee can possibly know. And those—savages—*are* dangerous. There were—troubles—when we first came here. You remember young Tom Bailey. *He* was going to make friends with them. They tore him apart and ate him."

"That was a long time ago, John."

"Yes, a long time ago . . ."

They could remember, both of them. Fifty years, half a century, a lifetime. They had come from a crowded

earth, more than eleven light-years to the fifth planet of the Procyon system. There had been great plans then, plans to start a new life, plans to work with the inhabitants of Procyon V, plans for visits back to earth.

Plans . . .

For seven years the ships had come on schedule, driving through the gray reaches of space prime. The Colony had been successful. For a while, it was a good place to be: alive, creative, sure.

And then the ships had stopped.

There was no warning; there could be no warning. The ships from earth simply did not come.

Messages, yes. But they were old transmissions, long outdated. It took better than ten years for radio waves to span the gulf between earth and Procyon V. It took more than twenty years to send a message and receive a reply.

There was no clue to what had happened in any of the messages. There had been no word at all for the last thirty-five years. That meant, of course, that the transmissions from earth had ceased even before the last ships had come . . .

The colonists were cut off, isolated, forgotten. It was a shock beyond belief, and it hurt. The scars went deep.

It was anybody's guess what had happened. A political revolution, possibly, a revolt against the exploration of space. A religious upheaval and a creed that space travel was evil. A plague, a war, a lapse into barbarism.

It made no difference.

They were alone, more alone than men had ever been. For all they knew, they *were* the human race. There might be survivors in other colonies on other worlds. There might be people left on earth.

And there might not.

They had to preserve what was left. They had to be careful. They could not afford the luxury of experiments.

They survived. They imitated life. That was all.

They knew a fear that was beyond calculation.

And now, finally, they were stirring. They had found the strength to break the pattern, to make a gesture, to try, to seek . . .

"He's out there now," Dana Bigelow said. "If only we could help him—"

Old John Melner shook his head. "We've done what we can do. You know the analysis. He has to be alone. He has to be romantically—idealistically—motivated. He has to believe that it is in his hands. The decisions must be his to make. We can't help. We can only get in his way."

"What *can* we do?"

John Melner managed a bitter old man's smile. "We can wait," he said.

Lee Melner stepped Outside.

Something hit him, spun him around. He fell to his hands and knees, gasping.

Wind. He knew what it was; he had studied about it. He was not prepared for the reality. He had known only still air.

This was different. Raw, wild, strong! It smacked him like a thousand fists. It howled at his clothes. It ripped at his flesh.

Lee's mind reeled; he was assaulted by sensations. He could not sort them out. Smells of green and growing things, smells of wetness, smells of immense quantities of free and moving air. Light: intense flaming white light

that seared his eyes. Colors: vivid greens and blacks and browns and blues. Sounds: the wind that moaned, the trees that creaked, the grasses that cracked and slithered . . .

He struggled to his feet, rocking, bracing himself.

He narrowed his eyes to slits, trying to absorb what he saw.

Behind him, the vast arch of the dome. He could not see it all, of course. It looked peculiar to him, somehow reversed. It gleamed in the light. He could not see through it; it was a gigantic bubble of reflective glare.

Ahead of him was a band of sterile ground, gray and grimy, that circled the bottom of the dome wall. It was narrow, less than seventy yards in most places, but it seemed formidable to Lee. There were few open spaces in the world he knew.

Beyond that was a tremendous green plain, alive in the rivers of wind, huge beyond comprehension. Bare and jagged mountains of dark, shining rock, far away, so distant that he had no concepts to judge them by.

And a sky, the first sky he had ever seen, a sky without a roof, a sky that went on forever, a sky that dwarfed him, a sky that held a swollen white sun that burned—

Lee drank it in. He was beyond fear, beyond excitement. He was alive, out of the tomb! He could do anything, go anywhere.

He yelled a wild animal yell.

The wind ripped it from his mouth, hurled it away.

He ran, stumbling and falling, across the sterile band. The gritty gray stuff stuck to his shoes, worked into his feet. It smeared itself on his jacket, his knees, his hands.

He reached the green grasses and collapsed. He rolled

in the damp, tough stems, feeling the moist soil beneath him. He sniffed the juices of life. The wind moaned at him, but he was under it now and it was lessening. He laughed like a madman, laughed with a strange glee that was sweeter than anything he had ever known.

He surged to his feet, challenging the wind. He moved through the grasses at a pace somewhere between a fast walk and a trot. He felt strong, confident, and eager. He had no fixed destination; he simply moved away from the Colony. He could not get lost. The dome was so big that it hardly diminished in size no matter how far he went. Within a day's range it would still be visible.

He paused. The first note of caution intruded on his mood. He did not want the night to catch him Outside. He had never experienced that kind of darkness, in the open, with an invisible world pressing in on him . . .

Still, there was plenty of time.

He moved on. The sun burned his face and hands, but it was not yet painful. The wind was cool and the grasses danced, and the thick, stunted trees whispered a song to him . . .

Abruptly, he came to a small clearing. There was a tiny spring of crystal-clear water that bubbled up from a rock formation. There was a path that led away from the spring, and tracks in the soft soil, many tracks.

And there was someone—or something—in the clearing.

Lee stopped short. He dropped to his belly and held his breath. Somehow, he had not expected this. He knew about the savages that lived Outside, of course. He had planned to contact them, one day when he knew more. But not now, not so soon, not the very first time . . .

Why not? Why not today?

He lay very still and studied the figure in the clearing.

It was a female, he decided, and very old. She was sprawled on her side, her eyes closed. Her breathing was so shallow that she almost seemed dead. Her arms were thin and very long. Her knees were flexed under a stained yellow tunic of animal skin. There was hair on her wrinkled face.

She was not human. She was neither good to look at nor ugly. She was just there, a half-alien thing in the dirt.

Half alien, yes. And half something else. An old woman, alone, more dead than alive.

Sick?

Lee stood up. There was nothing to fear here. He came from a world where illness was something rare, and curable when it happened. He was not afraid of it. The old woman certainly could not harm him. They were alone in the clearing.

He took a cloth and moistened it in the spring. The water was cold. He knelt beside the woman and gently bathed her wrinkled face. He made soothing noises.

She smelled. There was an old deep scar on her forehead.

She opened her eyes. They were astonishingly clear and a bright, hard green.

She hissed, horribly. She raked at him with her claws.

Lee moved back, not too fast. He saw a cluster of purple berries on a nearby bush. He had no idea whether or not they were edible, but that was unimportant. He needed to make a gesture that she would understand.

He picked a handful of the fat berries. He bit into

one, tasting it. It was sweet and juicy. He placed the berries near the woman's head and stepped back again.

He waited, not rushing her. The wind had died and the clean air was almost still. He could see thin eddies of blue smoke curling up in the distance. The trampled path led in that direction.

The old woman shook her hairy head and groaned. She reached out and grabbed the berries. She crammed them into her mouth, all of them. She chewed with stained and worn-down teeth. She swallowed.

She tried to get up and failed. She looked at Lee with those strange metallic green eyes. She seemed puzzled and confused now. Her eyes came in and out of focus.

She tried again to rise. She could not make it. She fell back on her side.

She said something harsh and guttural. It might have been a curse or a prayer or nothing at all.

She stopped speaking. She lay perfectly still, barely breathing.

Lee made his decision. He did not know what the old woman was doing here. He was not a fool, and he had studied something about primitive peoples; the Colony school was a good one and Lee—although he was unaware of it—had received special attention. The old woman might be sick; she could have been separated from the others to protect the village. She was very old; she could have been abandoned or crawled out herself to die. She might have come to the spring and simply been unable to return. She might be lost, although that was unlikely.

There was no way to tell. What was certain was that he had *already* made contact. That had not been his plan, but plans were made to be changed.

Lee picked up the woman and cradled her in his arms. She stiffened but had no strength to fight. There was not much meat on her bones. She smelled of sweat and soil and age.

Carrying the woman in his arms, Lee started down the path toward the tendrils of blue smoke.

A cluster of pithouses covered with roofs of branches and plastered mud. Hives, like miniature domes. Blending into the landscape: natural, weathered, timeless. Smells of burning wood and fire-dripping meat.

A great white sun, blazing at the zenith.

Sounds: cries, screams, whistles.

People: squat hairy men with hugely muscled arms dangling below their knees, half-naked women, bright-eyed children peering from doorways.

Weapons: long spears with stone points, clubs, flaked-stone knives with leather handles.

Lee put the old woman down and stepped slowly back. He made no sudden moves. He kept his hands in plain sight.

He was defenseless, of course. He had no knowledge of killing.

He waited, looking into hard unreadable alien eyes.

The thought came to him that he was very close to death. He felt it, deep down, but his mind rejected it. He stood quietly, resisting the impulse to run.

The old woman groaned and stretched out a bony hand toward her people.

A man grunted something, put down his spear, and walked to her. He stared straight at Lee but did not speak. He picked the woman up—casually, as though she were a stick of firewood—and carried her back. He

put her down by the hide-covered hole that served as a doorway to one of the smoking pithouses. Hands reached out and pulled her inside.

Lee waited. He could do nothing else.

Time passed, slowly. The great white sun moved in the sky.

After an age, a man moved. He was old but not feeble. He stepped into a pithouse, a knife in his gnarled hand. He emerged in a moment with a charred dripping hunk of meat impaled on the knife.

The man walked up to Lee and stopped. Lee could smell the grease in his hair. The man extended the knife.

Carefully, Lee put out his hand. He grasped the chunk of meat. It was hot and slippery. He pulled it from the flaked-stone blade of the knife.

He bit into it. The meat was tough, and the flavor was strong. He chewed it as best he could and managed something resembling a smile.

The old man smiled back. He sheathed his knife. He reached out and touched Lee, gently.

The other men put down their spears and clubs. The women began to chatter. Children emerged from doorways.

The vast river of wind stirred, gathering its power. Long black shadows crept across the land. The heat of the sun was fading.

Lee did not care. He grinned broadly now.

Something, perhaps, was over.

Something else was ready to begin.

Many times, Lee Melner went through the hidden exit and rejoined the Outside People.

He studied them, hunted with them, ate with them, laughed with them. He came to know them, little by little.

They were both less and more than he had imagined. Less, because they were not romantic creatures of an idyllic world of dreams. They were tough, brutal, and hard.

The old woman he had saved had indeed crawled away to die; she had too many years and had become a burden. She went out again and this time she did not return.

There was death, too, among the very young. Infants rarely survived very long. Death came to them in many guises: sudden, sure, unsentimentalized. Lee had never seen young people die before.

But the people were more than that . . .

It was curious. In the midst of death—and uncertainty and sickness and desperate hardship—there was life. There was promise. There was a quickening of the blood, laughter that eased pain, new dreams, new beginnings.

And there was the sun and the great wind and the enormous sky and the stars and the rain . . .

The contrast with the Colony was stark and clear. Inside the dome, there was order, security, peace—and decay. Under the dome, there was no real tomorrow. There was only a slow ending.

Lee learned who had sent him from the Colony and why. He knew that he had a decision to make. The decision was not easier with his father involved.

It was not easy, period.

He could not just run away. *He* was the alien on this world, even though he had been born here. He was

drastically different from the Outside People. And he was a man, with a man's sexuality. He needed a woman of his own kind. He needed Ellen.

He could not bring the Outside People into the Colony. They could never adapt to it, and it would be wrong to try. There was no point at all in inflicting a dead end on them.

He could not bring the Colony to the Outside People. It was utterly impossible. The citizens of the Colony lived on a pyramid of technology; they could not move. And they were set in their ways, frozen, more fearful than any savage child huddled in the darkness and the howling wind . . .

Lee knew something of history; he had been carefully taught. He knew the dangers of contacts between an advanced civilization and bands of primitive hunters. It was rough on the hunters, always. Rough, and usually fatal.

On earth, the hunters had been obliterated. Technological civilization had triumphed.

And now, perhaps, there was no life on earth.

It was not an easy decision that Lee Melner had to make.

But he made it.

John Melner looked at his son. "Well," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "You have something to tell me."

Lee searched for the words that would not come. Old John seemed so frail, his lined face sunken beneath his fine white hair, his thin hands trembling slightly even when supported by the top of the table . . .

The small room was very still.

"It was my decision to send you out, Lee. There were no strings attached. You have had nearly a year to make up your mind. We have put no pressure on you. You asked for this audience. Come on, lad. Spit it out."

Lee stood there, his skin roughened by the sun and the wind. He felt strange, an outsider in the house of his own father. He could not find words that did not carry pain.

Old John snorted. "Dammit, boy, I was born on *earth*. I crossed the gulf between the stars. I had the rug pulled out from under me on an alien planet. You can't hurt me, Lee, except with silence."

"Okay," Lee said slowly. "I think there is just one thing to do. I don't like it, but there it is."

Old John smiled. "Where?"

Lee did not return the smile. He had to force himself to speak. "There is no future here, in the Colony. The ships will never come back. We cannot bring the Outside People into the dome; it would kill everything that they are. The Colony itself cannot change; it is too precariously balanced, and the adults are locked into a life way they are afraid to alter. It has sustained them too long."

"It is a good analysis, if a trifle grim. And so?"

Lee took a deep breath. "And so," he said, "the young people must go Outside. They must go and try to make a new life, and they must go soon."

"Before they become too wise?"

Lee shrugged. "Before they reach the same conclusions that your generation reached. Before they begin to —repeat."

Old John stared at his son. "*All* of the young people?"

"All who wish to go. That will be most of them. It

makes no difference, really. There will not be enough left behind to sustain the population."

"You've thought of that, have you?"

"Yes."

"You are pronouncing a sentence of death."

"Yes. If there were some other way—"

"But there isn't. Either some die, sealed in this mechanical prison, or all die. Is that it?"

"That's about the size of it."

Lee hung his head. He could not face his father's eyes. He kept remembering the emaciated old woman, out there by the spring in the sun and the wind. She, too, had faced death alone. She, too, had been abandoned by those who were young and strong . . .

"When will you go?"

"Soon. When we are ready."

"And will you—say goodbye?"

"Yes, of course. And we will come back to see you."

"Occasionally. That would be—helpful."

A long silence fell between them.

John Melner broke it. "We will be comfortable; that is something. Extinction, after all, is just an inability to change. You are right; *we* cannot change. But we can let you go, if we are big enough. We can give you the gift of hope. And perhaps, one day, you will remember . . ."

"We'll remember," Lee whispered.

Old John stood up, his face composed. "I'm getting maudlin in my senility," he said. "I'm proud of what you have done, Lee—and of what you will do. Now go and leave me alone for a while. We both have much to do."

Lee left the room and the door hissed shut behind him.

John Melner sat down and closed his eyes. He felt very tired.

He did not try to fool himself; he had never done that. His son's decision was probably the right one, the only one. He would support it. But the young could be cruel, cruel . . .

He shook his head. Lee had not reckoned with the possibility that he might fail. It was all very well to march off into the sunrise filled with brave hopes and dreams. But there would be many sunrises and many sunsets. Dreams had a way of fading with age. He was not optimistic.

Still, they had a chance.

That was the only gift he had left to give.

And the alternative—

"The alternative," he said quietly, "is to be like me."

He opened his eyes. He felt the half-forgotten tears, the tears for what was lost and for what might have been.

Old John Melner looked at the closed door.

"Lee, Lee," he whispered. "God, if I could only go with you!"

Slowly, the old man turned back to the papers on his desk and began to do what had to be done.

GENERATION GAP

by Mack Reynolds

1.

"First of all, I think it might be sensible if we adopt organizational names. I think I'll call myself Ron."

"Why? What's the need?" one of the other two said.

The self-named Ron said, "Because we're going to have enemies. No ruling group in history ever stepped down without a fight. We might as well start out now confusing them."

"You're probably right," the girl said, "I'll be Alice."

Ron looked at her in amusement. "Seeking a new Wonderland, eh?"

"Exactly."

The third member of the group said, in the same mood, "I'll be Paul—spreading the new gospel."

Ron said, "All right. Alice, what is your Ability Quotient?"

"Why, 238, the last time I checked."

"And yours, Paul?"

Paul frowned. "231. Why?"

"Mine is 306."

"306!" Paul said. "I didn't even know they could go that high."

Ron reached out to the screen on the small table and activated it. He said, "Dossier banks. I want to consult the file of this identity number." He put his ID card in the screen's slot. "The AQ rating, please."

"Ability Quotient, 306," the screen said mechanically.

Ron deactivated it and turned back to the others.

Paul was scowling. He said, "What was all that for? I was willing to take your word for it."

"Just to make sure you'd agree that I was the most suitable to head this group."

"Now wait a minute. How about putting this to a vote?"

Alice was thinking about it. "Ron's right," she said. "The very point of our initiating this movement is to abolish an outdated elective system. If we can't apply the basic principles to ourselves, we don't make much sense. Ron has the highest AQ. Very well, until we recruit someone with a higher one, he's top man."

Paul said, only slightly grudgingly, "All right. I would have voted for you anyway, had it been put to a vote."

Ron said, "Now, first of all, this is your apartment, Paul. How do you know it isn't bugged? Have you mopped it? Security has bugs now undetected by the most sophisticated of mops."

Paul grinned at him. "Don't I know it? I designed them."

"Well, is there any chance at all that this discussion is being recorded?"

Paul was still grinning. "I know very well it is. They keep a sharp eye on people in my position."

Ron and Alice both stared at him.

Paul chuckled. "Remember, I work in Computer Control. I've had the bug in this apartment shunting the material it picks up off into a bank where I can wipe it when I go to work this evening."

"Good," Ron said. "Now, my suggestion is that we adopt the cell system first utilized by the nineteenth-century nihilists. Each of us will go out and recruit five others. Each of these will know only his fellow cell members and the cell leader. If there is betrayal, or if one is caught by Security, then he can reveal only five persons. As soon as we have fifteen persons in our ranks, we will split and send each of the new members off to form cells of their own, and when that has been accomplished, we will split them again. If this movement proves as popular as I expect it to be, it should grow in a geometric progression. For all practical purposes, our whole generation should be with us within a short time."

Alice was frowning. "What's the need of all this secrecy? There's nothing illegal in what we propose."

Ron nodded. "No, there isn't, at this stage. But remember that they control the legal machinery, and if they get their wind up, as sooner or later they will, then they're in a position to pass some new laws, or amend or revoke some of the old."

"Reasonable," Paul nodded. "Now then, how soon do you figure we can announce the new political party? With only three of us so far, it would be a little silly to call ourselves a party now."

Ron was shaking his head. "There isn't going to be a new political party."

Both of his companions were taken aback by that.

Paul blurted, "Well, what in the hell are we here for?"

Ron said reasonably, "What good would a political party do us? The older generations could outvote us twenty to one."

Alice said unhappily, "I rather had in mind that we'd woo a majority of them over to our side. After all, our regime would be more efficient, more progressive."

"They don't want more efficiency. They're nervous about the degree of it we've got now. Why do you think they consistently vote smaller and smaller budgets for research? They don't want more progress; new discoveries might rock the boat. They want to stay right where we are now, with we of the younger generation doing all the work, and they doing the governing, making the decisions, enjoying the gravy. Do you realize that the generation born between 1950 and 1975 is at present about fifty per cent of the population? All, in short, beyond retirement age so far as production and services are concerned, but all still retaining the vote. Our generation, born between 1975 and 2000 are only five per cent of the population and those of us beneath the age of eighteen can't vote. How can we possibly overthrow them with a political party? We no longer breed like rabbits, the way they did in their time."

Paul said in disgust, "Then what's the alternative?"

Ron said, "In the old days, governments used to be overthrown by enraged, usually hungry, majorities—an underclass. Well, there are no classes any more and most certainly nobody is hungry. And while a few of us might be enraged, such as we three here, the overwhelming majority are as pleased as pigs in swill with the status

quo. The majority is oppressing a minority consisting of about five per cent."

Paul said, still in disgust, "You didn't answer my question. What have we got as an alternative to a political party?"

"That's what we've got to figure out."

"No force and violence," Alice said. "The world's got beyond that."

2.

When he entered, there were approximately fifteen senior students scattered informally about the room. They were in their middle and late teens. With the revolution in educational techniques, graduation from the university came at a younger age. They fell silent and took him in, speculatively.

He said, "You can call me Paul. That's not my name, but it will do for our purposes."

He was in his late teens and darkly handsome, as practically everyone was handsome in this age of cosmetic surgery. He was of average height and weight, and would never have stood out in a crowd.

One of the students stood and said, "Just a minute . . . Paul. How do we know this room isn't bugged?"

"It is. However, I have just activated a musher I have in my pocket. In our ranks are some computer and electronic-bug technicians of the first caliber, well up on the most recent security devices. We keep one step ahead of officialdom."

He stood to one end of the room and said, "By the way, I might begin by bringing to your attention that

both by tradition and by law bugs are prohibited in university cities. When a society begins to interfere with the traditional freedoms of students, then something is sick in the society. It shouldn't have to be necessary."

A murmur of acceptance went through the small group.

Paul said, "All of you are on the verge of graduation. All of you have Ability Quotients in excess of 220. Most likely all of you will be selected by the computers to fill positions in your various specialties. Our generation group comprises some five per cent of the population. As far back as the nineteen-sixties, Mr. Richard Bellman of the Rand Corporation predicted that by the year 2000 two per cent of the work force of the country would be able to produce all that the country could consume. Today our generation supplies the work force of the nation. When I say work force, of course, I mean everyone employed in useful endeavor from research scientists down to what few manual laborers are still required in this computerized-automated economy."

One of his listeners spoke up. "This is pretty elementary, isn't it?"

"Yes, deliberately so. Please hold with me."

Paul went on. "With the coming of the Ability Quotient and the computer data banks, a veritable revolution took place in our society. Your AQ includes not only the old IQ, mathematical aptitude, and mechanical aptitude tests of the early and mid-twentieth century, but just about everything else we have figured out to test from digital dexterity to memory. It all adds up to your Ability Quotient. And this, of course, is applied to the particular field in which you are most apt.

"Upon your graduation and coming of working age,

the computers will check you out in fine detail. They will apply your AQ rating to all the various positions currently open in the nation. And the man with the highest AQ will be fitted into the slot. Those not chosen at all will have to subsist on their Guaranteed Annual Income, which for our generation is not very high."

Paul paused a moment. He said, then, "In many respects the system has its advantages. The best man goes into the job open. You might say there is an element of democracy in it." He chuckled. "Although the vote is taken by cold-blooded, or rather bloodless, machines, not by ourselves. However, whether or not this is a democratic method of running our economy, our civil government is a form of dictatorship and a dictatorship of incompetents, at that."

Somebody protested. "The President and all the others are elected. And there's no hanky-panky, either. The elections are computer-controlled. A crooked politician couldn't steal a vote if he wanted to."

"And he wouldn't want to," Paul said sarcastically. "Because he doesn't have to. Our generation, which does all the work in this nation, is five per cent of the population. That population explosion they were so afraid of a few decades ago simply didn't materialize. In actuality, the birth rate began falling off in the nineteen-fifties. Your politican's generation and those older are some ninety-three per cent of the population and they vote as a block.

"The generation between 1950 and 1975 numbers a majority of our people. Their Ability Quotient is less than one hundred. The average AQ of our generation, due to the new education techniques and mental stimula-

tion, is well over two hundred. But it is they who make the decisions."

Paul went on. "Each year they increase the Guaranteed Annual Income of the older generations. They decrease the budgets of original research, for space, for just about all development projects except those that involve improving the lot of the older generations. They increase the budget of the Department of Security and tighten the reins of government. It is a system of the status quo and in no period in history has a healthy society made a fetish of the status quo. Along that path lies disaster."

He switched the subject.

"There are already three cells of our organization on this campus. Each of you will be contacted by one of them for further private discussion and possible recruitment. The world calls for change. I hope to see you within our ranks."

3.

Homer Van Meter had few close friends. His position in life didn't allow for them. Multitudes on the hail-fellow-well-met level, but few real friends. One of these few was Charles Stocker, whom he had known since school days, long years past, and who now sat with him in his office over a bottle of cold beer.

The President was saying, "It was bad enough back when we were kids. The older generation simply couldn't communicate with them. They figured the world was going to pot by the minute."

His Department of Security director nodded. "It's al-

ways been the case. Each generation figures the one coming up is a lost generation. Somehow or other, since the First World War, at least, they all seem to get lost."

Homer Van Meter pursued it. "It was probably different back in the nineteenth century and before. Things didn't change so fast. A young fellow of, say, seventeen, living on a farm, had the same problems, the same goals, did the same kind of work his grandfather did. They could talk, communicate. It's this accelerated progress we've been having that's made the big change. Doubling knowledge every eight years. Do you realize what that means? Suppose we figure it started in 1940 at that pace, the way Dr. Robert Oppenheimer claimed. That the sum total of human knowledge could be termed one, at that time. What would it be today, in the year 2014? Two hundred and fifty times as much. The chilling thing is that you and I were born not too long after 1940, Charlie. No wonder we can't possibly keep up."

The Security chief finished his beer. "Which makes it doubly necessary to reiterate that age has its privileges and that youth must be kept in its place. We'll either stick together, we of the older generations, or one day we'll wake up to find our world turned upside down."

There had been a strange element in his voice and President Van Meter looked at him narrowly. "Something new?"

"Yes, but I haven't much dope on it as yet."

"Well, let me have it."

His Security head shifted unhappily in his chair. "Some kind of organization is being formed in the generation born between 1975 and 2000. In short, the current working years."

His superior took him in. "What kind of an organization?"

"Secret. It can't be very large—so far. I've been able to get precious little on it."

"With all our appropriations for Security?"

His friend said defensively, "There's one thing about my department, Homer. The agents, as you well know, are taken from our generation."

"Yes, yes. Get to the point."

"The point is, the agents are our generation but the technicians in the department are in the current one."

The President scowled at him.

Charles Stocker said, "We need a considerably higher AQ than our agents average out to operate our equipment."

"So."

"So I'm beginning to suspect that at least some of our technicians belong to the new organization. There's been one hell of a lot of electronic bugs, monitoring computers, and related equipment going on the blink at crucial times when this new outfit is involved."

"All right. I'm sure you'll figure it out. Have you caught any of them at all?"

"Only five. They're divided into cells of six members each, including the cell leader. Only the cell leader knows the leaders of five other cells and that group in turn has a head. How the higher echelons are organized, I don't know as yet."

The President said, "What's the charge against the five?"

"Conspiracy to subvert the government."

"Will it hold up?"

"No. Not under our present laws."

"Ummm. Possibly we'll have to change some laws."

"Yes. And quickly. I need more authority to thwart this gang."

"Well, what did you wring out of them, Charlie? What do they want?"

"They think the generation that does the work and the research and so forth should have prevailing voice in the civil government and the setting of the nation's goals."

"What! Why, that's unconstitutional!"

"Yes, if I have it right they want to change the Constitution."

"They're insane then! The people won't stand for it! The overwhelming majority are in favor of the present Constitution."

"They evidently don't give a damn about the overwhelming majority. If it was put to the vote, I imagine that ninety per cent of the adult population of this country would back the status quo, but this organization couldn't care less."

"How do they expect to bring about these unconstitutional changes? Confound it, numerically they can't be more than a handful."

There was a puzzled expression on the Security head's face. "I don't know."

"We'll put some teeth in our antisubversion laws," the President snapped.

"The trouble is, Homer, that they run the country. They produce all that is produced. They distribute all that's distributed. They even operate all our communications and transportation systems. And nobody else can do it. We older generations don't know how to utilize the

equipment. If we arrested them all, or even a majority of them, the economy would come to a standstill."

President Homer Van Meter stared at him, frustrated.

And Security Director Charles Stocker sat there, wordlessly, staring back.

Finally, Van Meter put out a hand and activated one of his desk screens. He said into it, "Helen, send in Owyler."

Stocker said, "Who's Owyler?"

"You haven't met him. New member of my staff. Kid of about nineteen."

"Can you trust him in a thing like this?"

Homer Van Meter glared. "I trust him. It's the same as the technicians in your department. To operate in the world today you've got to have these double-domes, these supereggheads. What's your AQ, Charlie?"

"About fifty."

"Well, his is astronomical. And I need him. Let's face reality, Charlie. My AQ is about the same as yours."

Peter Owyler's features were good but offbeat enough so that it was obvious he had not resorted to cosmetic surgery to improve them. For one thing, he had a very wide mouth. He was slightly smaller than average and moved with a nervous quality.

He came before the President's desk, at informal attention and said, "Yes, Mr. President."

Homer Van Meter went through quick introductions and his Security chief didn't bother to stand to shake hands with the younger man.

The President said, "Peter, have you heard about a new organization in your generation group that wants

to . . . well, make basic changes in the Constitution of this country?"

His assistant frowned slightly. "Yes, sir, some."

"What do you know about them?"

"Actually, my schedule is rather full. I have little time to—"

"All right, all right. Whatever you've been working on, son, you're off it as of now. I want you to infiltrate this group. If you're as smart as the computers say, you shouldn't have too much trouble getting to the top."

"Yes, Mr. President. And what do I do when I get to the top?"

"You secure the identity of their leaders. There's no use chopping away at the tail of this snake. We're going to have to cut off its head before it gets any larger."

When the young man had gone, Charles Stocker looked at the door that had closed behind him. He said, "Can you trust him? He's their generation, not ours. Owyler, Owyler. I've heard the name before."

The President said, "He took it to avoid any suggestion of nepotism. It was his mother's maiden name. We were married and divorced while you had that assignment in the Orient. He's my son, Charlie."

4.

Ron, Paul, and Alice sat at the head of the conference table. Around it were seated twelve others, six boys and six girls. None of them looked older than twenty.

Ron had a gavel. He tapped it for order and looked about the table. He said, "Where's Dempsey Harrison?"

One of the women at the far end of the table said, "He was picked up yesterday by Security."

Ron winced.

Paul growled, "He was one of our most dedicated, but dedication isn't enough. Security has drugs and techniques now that can crack anybody. He'll blow the cover of every area leader in his section and they, in turn, when picked up, will reveal the names of every cell leader. Every organization member in that whole section will be arrested."

But the woman who had known about Harrison's arrest shook her head. "Harrison was really dedicated. He had a cyanide pill in his possession."

A shock went through the assembled group.

"Our first martyr," Ron said finally.

Alice had closed her eyes in pain. "Our first violence," she said.

Ron said, "You don't overthrow a ruling group by playing pattycakes." He took a deep breath. "How many more of our people have been taken this past week?"

One by one they reported on their respective sections. More than twenty cells had been arrested throughout the country and two area leaders taken.

One of the section leaders said, "There's a new element. They're turning rank-and-file members loose again, after arresting them. They give them a hard time, warn them, tell them they're being kept under continual surveillance, and make them report weekly to the local Security offices, but they turn them loose."

Someone else said, "They're even turning cell leaders loose again in my section. They put a bug on them and

monitor everything they say or is said in their vicinity, but they turn them loose."

Ron nodded. "They have to, and the larger we get the more it will apply. They can't arrest the whole working force of the country. However, they aren't going to release anybody as high as an area leader, not to mention you section leaders and we three on the Executive Committee. We're more apt to get a bullet in the back of our head." He looked around the table. "Anything special to be brought up at this meeting?"

One of the women stirred in her chair and raised a finger.

Ron said, "Bertha?"

"I'm developing a feeling of frustration and sense it throughout the membership in my section. Where are we going? What are we accomplishing?"

Ron said, "So far, we're simply getting together. Forming an organization. When we get it formed, we'll have to decide how to accomplish our ends."

Bertha said, "It's my opinion that we ought to resolve a program now. Among other things, I think it would speed up recruiting if we had a blueprint of our goal and how to get there."

Ron looked at her and twisted his mouth sourly. "Do you have any suggestions, Bertha?"

"No force and violence," Alice said.

5.

When Marcy Zimmerman entered that morning, Dr. Andrew Lang was staring glumly at the screen on his desk. His nurse began shuffling through her standard of-

fice routine. She appeared to be about seventeen or eighteen and she was a bit taller than average with a very good, somewhat slight figure. Her mouth was a bit heavy and her eyes were tinted gray and she had a good golden skin which went well with her dark red hair.

He said sourly, "You're a bit late, aren't you?"

"Yes, Dr. Lang. Sorry. A traffic tieup."

"Hear the news?"

"No, not so far today."

"The government's knocked the research budget in half. The lowest it's been in decades. In fact, I can't remember when it's been so low."

"Good heavens, why? We're on the verge of a dozen breakthroughs."

"The funds were needed to increase the Guaranteed Annual Income of the older generations."

"The older generations? But not ours . . . ?"

"Evidently we're so young that we don't require the number of amenities the old-timers do. We'll come into our own in the sweet bye and bye." He grunted. "By the way, you don't have anything on your conscience, do you?"

"Conscience? Why, no. How do you mean?"

"Before you came in, two Security agents turned up, looking for you. The usual clods. Evidently, little AQ is needed to be a cop, which is undoubtedly the reason why such positions can be held by members of the older generations."

"But what did they want?"

"They asked quite a few questions that didn't make much sense. They wanted to know with whom you associated. I told them I didn't know, which was true, but I don't know if I would have told them if I did know.

They got somewhat ridiculously evasive and hinted around at the possibility that you had attempted to recruit me into some sort of secret organization or other. It was all rather foolish."

Nurse Zimmerman moistened her lower lip. "But then they left?"

"Why, no. I sent them into the inner office to cool their heels until your arrival."

"I see. Well, I'll go and find whatever it is they want. But first . . . ah, I want to go to the ladies' room, out in the hall."

"Of course."

She took up her bag and headed for the rear door.

"Miss Zimmerman."

"Yes?" She turned and looked at him. Her breath was short.

"I'll hold them as long as I can. I suggest that you not leave by the lobby. There might be others."

"Thanks . . . Andrew."

She was gone.

Using the stairs, she descended all the way to the basement level and left the building by the way of the electro-steamer ramp. She walked briskly along the street, stopped in an autocafeteria she often used. She went into a public TV phone booth, checked in all directions before dialing.

Ron's face faded onto the screen.

She said, "Ron. Security has flushed me. I'm on the run."

He said, "Right, Alice. Adopt Contingency A."

"Right."

"And, Alice."

"Yes?"

"Don't let them catch you. We're too near the culmination point to have our Executive Committee cracked now."

"Don't worry. I've taken a page from Dempsey Harrison's book. I've got a pill, Ron."

"Alice! Don't be foolish!"

She looked at him in deprecation before switching off the phone. She murmered softly to herself, "Ron, I have a sneaking suspicion that so do both you and Paul."

6.

When Charles Stocker entered the President's office, Homer Van Meter was standing at the window looking out over the White House lawn. Peter Owyler was seated to one side.

The President turned and said, "Hello, Charlie. I wanted you to sit in on Peter's preliminary report."

Stocker nodded, then looked at the younger man and said, "Hello, Peter. Any luck?" He took one of the heavy leather chairs.

"Some. Not much."

The President returned to his desk and sat in his swivel chair. "Well, let's have it."

Peter Owyler said, "The organization is headed by an Executive Committee of three. Ron is the ultimate head, the chairman of the committee, I suppose you would call him. The other two are named Alice and Paul."

"What are their last names?" Stocker said.

"I don't know. Those are pseudonyms, something like Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov calling himself N. Lenin."

"You mean they're Communists?" the President blurted.

"No. No, of course not. They've simply adopted some of the techniques worked out by revolutionists of the past." Peter Owyler looked at the Security head. "You almost caught the one called Alice."

"We *did?* When, where . . . ?"

"Evidently a routine check by two of your men. She got her wind up and ran for it. She was working as an office nurse under the name Marcy Zimmerman for a Dr. Andrew Lang. She's evidently gone into hiding."

Stocker brought a transceiver from his pocket and flicked back the cover. He said into the screen, "Crash priority. Complete dossier on a Marcy Zimmerman, who has been working for a Dr. Andrew Lang. I want everything in the data banks. I want the names, ID numbers, and addresses of every relative, friend, or even acquaintance. I want that woman. I repeat, this is crash priority. Get on it."

He flicked the cover closed and returned the portable TV phone to his pocket. He looked at Peter Owyler. "All right, what else?"

"Immediately below the Executive Committee is a subcommittee of thirteen section leaders. I assume that they've appointed someone to take the place of Dempsey Harrison, who committed suicide when your men caught him. The nation is divided into thirteen sections and under each section leader there is a varying number of area leaders, who in turn have a varying number of cells beneath them. Each cell has a cell leader and no more than five rank-and-file members. Total membership already goes into millions."

His father said, "Have you managed to get into this subcommittee as yet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I haven't had the time. Besides, they're very wary, particularly in those higher reaches of the organization. They know how vulnerable they are. If you cracked any member of the Executive Committee, you'd have the whole organization. Under your truth serums and so forth, they'd betray the organization from top to bottom."

The President grunted. "All right. Anything else?"

Peter Owyler said hesitantly, "I sense something in the air. As though some step is about to be made. I think possibly they've about decided that they have recruited all who will come over to them."

The President's face worked. He turned to his old friend. "Charlie, I want you to move into the White House here. I want you on immediate tap."

7.

It was two nights later that a knock came on the door of the small suite to which Charles Stocker had been assigned.

He had been sitting, coatless and in slippers, enjoying a relaxing scotch before plowing into some fresh reports.

He called, "Come in."

The door opened and two men and a woman entered and closed the door behind them. He realized, in sudden shock, that the two men wore pseudo-flesh masks. He

lurched to his feet and leaned forward toward the desk. His hand darted out to activate the screen.

But three guns had materialized and were directed at him.

One of the men said, "These are laser pistols. They'd cut you entirely in two, Stocker."

"What do you want?" the Security head asked. "How'd you get in here, past all the White House guards? How'd you know I was here, in this suite? What . . . ?"

One of them, who seemed the spokesman, held up a hand. "Let me introduce us. I am Ron, this is Alice, and this is Paul."

"You're under arrest!"

Paul chuckled and jiggled his gun.

Ron said, "We've come to deliver an ultimatum, Stocker. It would have been preferable to take it to the President himself, but I am afraid that might have been a little *too* difficult."

"Ultimatum! Are you mad?"

"No. This is the ultimatum. Tonight, after we leave here, we ourselves are going to feed into the computers the request to fill every governmental position in the country, now elective, with the person most suited, based on Ability Quotient for the position involved. When the selection is made, we will have the computers inform each person selected and request that he repair to his new job tomorrow at noon."

"Ridiculous! If any such persons show, they will be arrested for subversion."

"No. They will not. Tomorrow at noon, we three will be in the President's office to see who it is that turns up to take the position of chief executive."

"If you attempt to invade the President's office tomorrow, you will be arrested and dealt with as you deserve."

Paul expressed his amusement again.

The one who called himself Ron shook his head. "No. You see, we have found the lever we needed. It was before us all the time but we didn't recognize it. Perhaps you are unacquainted with a book by a Professor Feinberg, *The Prometheus Project,* written back in 1969. In it he called on humanity to set goals for the race, long-range goals. He made a good case, but then he, himself, pointed out that the problem was, Could one generation set goals that the next and the next would wish to work toward, or would each generation wish to set its own goals? We could set long-term goals involving, perhaps, hundreds of years, but how could we know if our children and grandchildren would be even vaguely interested in them?

"That's the position we're in now, Stocker. What your generation is doing now, through archaic election laws, is forcing our new, more highly educated generation to follow your goals, set years before. We rebel, Mr. Stocker."

The Security chief had gained courage in view of the fact that he was obviously in no immediate danger.

He said, "See here, why shouldn't you of the younger generation work your twenty years just as we of the older generation did? We did our share in our time. The younger generation owes it to the older to honor, respect, and take care of it."

Ron shook his head. "No. It's a teaching that goes back to antiquity; honor thy father and thy mother. But no. A child has no obligation to its parents, per se.

The child did not ask to be born. It didn't sign the contract to which attempt is made to hold it. Honor thy father and thy mother, *if* they deserve to be honored. The younger generation only owes respect, love, and honor to the older if the older conducts itself in such manner as to deserve them. Should the generation before yours honor the one that preceded them and tossed into their laps World War Two? Should your generation honor the one that bequeathed them Korea and the Vietnam farce?"

"I have no intention of debating the subject with you all night," Stocker snapped. "You said you had some mysterious lever to force us to submit. *What* lever? You don't make sense."

Ron said, "It took us a long time. You see, we had forgotten something. We, with our affluent society, with our high pay, with our ranks and titles, scientists, doctors, academicians, engineers, technicians. We thought we were an élite, and I suppose we are. But we are also workingmen and women—we're the new proletariat of the computerized-automated society. And we still have at our disposal the oldest weapon of the workingman, long unused, perhaps, through lack of need, but still available."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"The general strike."

The Security chief stared at him.

The one called Paul took it up, obvious enjoyment in his voice. "Even your own Security Department can't operate without our technicians. If you wish to order out your multitude of agents, how will you communicate with them, how will you issue orders? Our people control communications. How will your agents get from

one place to another? We control transportation. How will you keep your lights lit, even here in the White House? We control power. You see, Mr. Stocker, all we have to do is fold our arms and the country stops."

Charles Stocker slumped back into his chair.

Ron said, "Deliver the ultimatum. We will be in the President's office at noon, to find out who the next President is to be, and the next head of Security, for that matter, always assuming we'll continue your office. Alice!"

The girl stepped forward. She had returned her laser pistol to a pocket. Now she brought forth a hypodermic needle. "This won't hurt," she said professionally.

"What's that?" the Security man bleated.

"It will put you under for approximately half an hour. By that time we will be gone," she said soothingly.

She pressed home the charge and almost immediately he began to feel himself slip into unconsciousness, his muscles stiffening.

The last thing he saw them do, before they left, was throw their three guns to the top of his desk. Later he was to find that all three were children's toys.

8.

A few minutes before noon, the following day, Homer Van Meter, Charles Stocker and Peter Owyler sat in the presidential offices. There was a glum, frustrated atmosphere.

The President growled, "Any last-minute ideas, Charlie?"

The Security Director shook his head.

A secretary entered and said, "A Mr. John Beckwith, from Computer Control, Mr. President."

"What does he want, confound it?"

"To report on the selections the data bank recorded."

"Show him in."

John Beckwith entered. He carried a small briefcase.

He said, "It was thought possible, Mr. President, that you might want some last-minute consultation and prefer not to have it go through the usual communications system."

"Damn well told," the President growled. "Who did they pick for chief executive, the position to which I have been legally elected?"

Mr. Beckwith activated the automatic zipper on his briefcase and brought forth a paper. "On the basis of Ability Quotient, the computers selected a Mr. Arnold Anderson."

"Anderson! Never heard of him. One of these young whippersnappers, undoubtedly. Charlie?"

But the Security chief was as mystified as was Van Meter.

So was Peter Owyler. He shook his head. "Never heard of him."

"Beckwith, or whatever your name is?"

But that worthy, too, shook his head. "The name is strange to me."

Stocker looked at his watch with a grunt of approval. "Our Ron, Paul, and Alice weren't as smart as they thought they were. It's noon."

There came a light knock at the door. It opened and Marcy Zimmerman walked in. She smiled sweetly and said, "I'm Alice."

Charles Stocker shot to his feet. "How did you get in here? How did you get into the White House?"

She said, "I never left. I've been living for the last few days in Ron's quarters." She looked over at Peter Owyler. "Hello, Ron." And then at John Beckwith. "Hello, Paul."

The two older men, the nation's President and its head of Security, could only gape.

The President finally blurted at his son, "Traitor!"

But Peter Owyler shook his head. "No. We had this out last night with Stocker here. We owe you nothing, except what you have earned, and you have failed our generation. It was far gone time for us to take over the reins of government, as we are already in possession of the reins of the economy."

His father said bitterly, "And now what happens to us? I suppose we'll become the dispossessed."

Ron shook his head again. "We are not barbarians, Father. Society evolves, man becomes more civilized, not less. We are not savages who abandon the aged of the tribe, or knock them over the head when they become useless to the community. Your generation and those generations before you will be amply taken care of. Our point is that you people cannot direct society. It must be in the hands of the current generation. This is the only possible way to handle it. Because our generation too will, within a short period, historically speaking, become an older generation. If we took no measures to protect you, what ethical guarantee do we have that the following generations would take measures to protect us?"

Stocker, still in near-shock, said, "But you were work-

ing for us. You gave us inside information about your organization."

Ron looked at him. "Nothing that really helped you, and it put me in a position to sit in on your highest-level conferences."

A secretary entered briefly and said, "Mr. Arnold Anderson." The secretary looked rather blank, for some unknown reason. He turned and left.

A lad who could be no more than fourteen came in and looked about the room. He took in the large presidential desk and nodded. "Very nice," he said.

Paul—John Beckwith—was the first to find voice. "You're . . . *you're* Arnold Anderson?"

"That is correct, oldster."

"But," Ron said, "the computers selected *you* as the most competent to be chief executive of this nation?"

The newcomer looked at him. "What is your AQ, oldster?"

"Why, 306."

"Mine is 412."

All sat in long silence, except the newcomer, whose eyes, they could see, were very cold.

Ron took a deep breath. "Very well," he said. "We'll cooperate. We'll assist you until you get the feel of things."

"We already have the feel of things, oldster. We're not interested in the way *your* generation wants to operate, in your goals, either long-range or short. We have a saying: *You can't trust anybody over eighteeen.*"

THE WAITING WORLD

by Joseph Green

The Lincoln School counselor's door was always open. As a freshman David White had been impressed; to a senior it was only another part of the controlling authority. He stopped just inside the cluttered office, forcing himself to relax, holding down the simmering anger. In a deliberately low voice he asked, "Did you want to see me, Dr. Hartig?"

The counselor looked up from his paper-strewn desk. He was a lean, heavily tanned old man with a high shock of gray hair and craggy features. His voice was surprisingly light and pleasant. "Sure did, Dave. Couple of your teachers have talked to me. Going to enter you in the Career Transition Group tomorrow morning. Hope it helps."

David smiled and, when the old man's shrewd green eyes widened, knew that his bitterness and resentment must be showing. Transition Groups were for people

facing an important change and dreading it. In school, attendance could be voluntary or compulsory. David had never been to a Transition Group. "Why must I go, Counselor?" he asked.

"You seem to be having some emotional problems, Dave. Also, I heard you're thinking seriously of opting for a job instead of college. Be a shame, a waste of your mind, not to go on. A little interaction with the other uncertain ones will help you."

"I don't think so," said David, keeping his voice even. "Is that all, Counselor?"

"Other than the usual; to say you'll thank me one day. Good luck in the game tonight."

"Thank you, Dr. Hartig," David said, and he turned and walked out.

In the crowded hall David paused, and faced the fact he had taken out his own frustration and unhappiness on the school counselor. And the old man had always been kind to him. Impulsively he backtracked, poked his head around the door, and said, "I really meant those thanks!"

Dr. Hartig looked up, smiling. "Knew you'd come to; just not this soon. Now get to class!"

Feeling better, the lurking anger that came and went so easily gone now, David got his books and hurried through the swarm of chattering students to extrapolative studies. It was one of the few interesting classes in an otherwise dull final year of career preparatory, or high school, as his parents still called it. He was well prepared and made an oral presentation of highlights from his term paper. It was on the growth of medical facilities in orbit. This was a favorite topic, since at one time he had planned to specialize in zero-G surgery.

The other students were bored, as usual, but he saw by the instructor's expression that he was going to get a good mark.

There was one more class on this final day of school. David considered skipping it, but reluctantly turned back through the bustling crowd. He had taken only a few steps when a soft voice at his elbow said, "Dave?"

It was Lisa Janapolski. She was a slim, very pretty black-haired girl, tall enough at five eight to be a good dancing partner for him. Lisa was wearing a yellow body stocking with transparent arms and legs; her taste in dress was conservative. At one time they had been a steady pair, though her old-fashioned parents disapproved of Lisa twoing with boys outside her race and religion. Barry Schumacher had taken Lisa away from him, with the same careless ease with which he scored points in magnetoslide games. When he eventually dropped her, Lisa had made no effort to return to David. And he had been far too proud to attempt to bridge the gap.

"Dave, strictly QT on this," Lisa said in a low voice. "I overheard Adam McTavish flapping to Doug Carter that he's going to slide you out tonight, make your playing look bad. He thinks it will zip up the award for Barry, and he'll be so grateful he'll help Adam slip into a cushy spot in old man Schumacher's corp."

David was surprised and hurt. At one time he and Adam McTavish had been good friends. Lisa grasped his elbow. "Don't know if it's strictly Adam's ride, or Barry's floating with him. Barry can—can be a drek when he wants something. Anyway, you've been warned."

Lisa slipped away before David could ask questions,

deftly placing two laughing girls between them in the corridor. A moment later she had vanished in the crowd.

David went on to class, but Lisa's news had badly disturbed him. Word was out that he and Barry Schumacher were neck and neck for the magnetoslide scholarship, which carried a stipend for continuing studies. The money had little meaning to Barry, but the honor of winning meant a great deal.

That afternoon David skipped the free-floatbus, Kennedy City's only form of public transportation. Instead he walked the two miles to the low-rent King Housing Authority complex. The spring air was pleasantly cool, and the tree-lined walking paths in this planned city were soothing to the nerves. His family had moved here when he was a small child. David could still remember hard New York sidewalks and a crowded, dirty tenement building, with the street in front the only playground. But he could only smile when his parents told him how much better life was today. There was nothing good about being poor.

That was the reason anger and frustration were so close beneath the surface in these last days of school. David was sick of hearing more affluent classmates bragging about the fine colleges that had accepted them. And he was tired beyond endurance of constantly fighting to hold his own against better-equipped people like Barry Schumacher. Lisa's news had settled any lingering doubts in David's mind about the rightness of his decision. He was going to take the factory job offered at the recent graduates' recruiting meeting, regardless of whether he won or lost the scholarship.

Once in the cramped but modern four-room apartment, David started preparing the evening meal. His

parents would be home from work shortly. He dreaded having to tell them he had decided not to start premed. Both had been saving for the entrance fee for two years. No one in the White family had graduated from college in the four known generations, much less become a doctor.

The trouble with Daniel and Emma White, David had long ago decided, was that they were still living in the twentieth century—which was now four hundred years in the past. They acted as though starvation rather than a job awaited those who opted out. He faced six more years of grinding study to get that M.D., then two years' internship. And for what? To have a surburban home instead of an Authority apartment? Take his vacations in the Alps rather than sixty miles east at Virginia Beach? Millions of people drew their subsistence pay, watched Tri-D by the hour, and seemed perfectly content. Why did his parents set such high standards for him?

The older Whites arrived home almost together. David decided to say nothing until after the graduation ceremonies next day. Daniel White had only recently returned to work after a long period of unemployment. His old factory job had been automated, depriving most semiskilled production hands of their jobs. His present job paid only a little better than subsistence, after allowing for the additional expenses. Daniel worked as a matter of pride. With the added money from Emma White's job as clerk in a department store, the family had a livable income.

"You nervous 'bout this last game, Davie?" his father asked after dinner. Daniel White was a short, bald,

brown-faced man; his son towered over him by almost a foot.

"Nervous or not don't matter," Emma broke in before David could answer. "What counts is that award. You heard anything yet?"

"Just that it's between myself and Barry Schumacher. And I heard some flapping today that makes me think he'll get it." For a moment David was tempted to tell his parents what Lisa had said but he did not. It would only start them seeing a "whitey" conspiracy behind every bush again.

"You the team captain; why he get more credit 'an you?" demanded Daniel. But it was a rhetorical question. In magnetoslide the forwards did most of the scoring. Barry Schumacher had established a new school record for points scored within one year. And he was a very colorful, aggressive player; the fans loved him.

"His father's got more money than the World Bank! What makes Barry Schumacher want a few measly dollars more?" asked Emma.

"Because the money is supposed to be secondary. The most-valuable-player award isn't based on need," said David wearily. They had been over all this before.

"With Barry it's secondary; with us it's number one. We just can't make them first four years without it, Davie. There's no way." Emma's voice was strained; she too realized they were going over old ground. "Son, I know I've said it before; but you just don't know what it's *like* to find you ain't worth nothin' to the world! Your father and me were just kids in '75, when the riots almost tore this country apart, and a black face could get you carried off to jail for no reason at all. We got a little better deal today, but you're still nobody without a

good job. And you got the brains, Davie; what you short on is understanding." A large, tall woman of impressive dignity, she crossed the small room and stood looking up into David's face. "Son, you got to go as far as them brains will take you. And we got to help. Your daddy and me are ready, though we know it's gonna be a long, hard six years."

Impulsively, David put his arms around his mother and kissed her cheek—but turned away without answering. The temptation to tell them the sacrifice was unnecessary, that he wasn't going to strain the fragile family budget any longer, was almost overwhelming. David resisted it. When Barry won tomorrow he could blame his decision on loss of the scholarship.

And the high-scoring forward was certain to win. Barry was a relatively pleasant guy, well liked by almost everyone. His father was a self-made millionaire, and demanded absolute perfection of his only son. He had done an excellent job of instilling the competitive spirit in his offspring. Barry worked hard, and second place was never good enough. He drove a nice car, a present from his father for being at the top of the class academically as a junior.

David caught the floatbus to the gym and entered the locker room by the rear door. Most of the team were already there. He said hello to the others but avoided being drawn into the usual chatter; he was not in the mood for it. One of David's nicknames was "Quiet Man." He knew he was well liked in spite of not being talkative.

David changed into his bright-orange jersey and blue shorts. Coach Jackson entered as he was lacing the heavy shoes, and the loud talk quieted. The coach was a tall,

rangy man who had played basketball in his high school days. It was still his favorite game. The slower but more intricate magnetoslide was something he coached because it was required of him.

The young men listened respectfully as Coach Jackson gave his final pep talk of the year. It was the same old refrain, a litany they had heard a hundred times before. David looked at a spot just behind the man's head and endured. At least this would be the last one.

And finally it was time. They trotted into the gym and jumped the low bumper wall onto the court, to the accompanying cheers of their parents and schoolmates in the stands. David felt a familiar lift. He liked this game; it was one of the few aspects of school he honestly enjoyed. This was not a championship contest, but Lincoln's opponent was Kennedy Preparatory, the nearest school and an arch rival. Neither had made it into the finals, and this was a last chance to end the year on a note of pride.

David glanced at the home stands but failed to spot his parents. He did see Lisa Janapolski on the lowest tier.

The six Lincoln A-string players mounted their cup-shaped, flat-topped platforms. The Kennedy boys were just entering from the opposite end of the gym. David slipped his special shoes into the center slots and fastened the buckles. He pulled each foot in turn, testing the resistance, and the platform swayed with his movement. Over two feet wide and equally high, the magnetic platforms weighed almost five hundred pounds. The curved bottom enabled a player to rock far to the side, but the platform always returned to the vertical. A thick, spring-mounted rubber bumper ran around the outside rim.

The team's gearboy distributed the players' pushrods. David raised the five-foot wooden stick and critically checked the corrugated rubber shoe on a flex joint at its bottom. It was clean, the cleats sharp-edged. The pushrod and chargestick, an eighteen-inch metal cylinder lying flat in a clamp on top of the platform, were a magnetoslide player's only equipment.

A loud buzz signaled that the floor power was about to come on. When it ended, the six platforms at each end of the gym rose several inches in the air.

David touched his pushrod to the floor, leaned forward, and glided slowly to the captain's position near the center of their half of the court. He was careful not to work up much speed. The pushrod was efficient at getting a platform moving, not so good at stopping it. The two forwards were ahead of him, fifteen feet apart and just ten feet from the center line. The massive silver ball floated in the neutral zone, shimmering in the bright overhead light. It was perfectly round and over three feet in diameter, self-powered like the platforms but without a shock-absorbing bumper.

Adam McTavish and the other guard were behind David, spread apart like the forwards. The goalkeeper, already in constant motion, was patrolling restlessly in front of his cage. This was an open area behind a five-foot-wide hole in the bumper wall, where an opposing magnetic field would stop the ball. With the exception of the two openings at each end, the wall surrounded the playing area.

The cheerleaders on both sides of the gym had been leading each school's partisans in rousing salutes. They quieted as the umpire, an eye on the clock on the scoreboard, lifted his whistle. A shrill blast signaled the start

of the game. The two lead forwards, who already had their pushrods braced on the floor behind them, propelled themselves toward the silvery sphere with all their strength.

In concept magnetoslide was a simple game, somewhat like hockey; in practice, it was far more complex. A trick grid of wire under the wooden floor created a uniform and intense magnetic field just above it. Each platform had a massive coil in its base, with power supplied by a built-in plutonium thermoelectric generator. The field in this coil was directly opposed to that of the floor, and the platforms and ball floated almost friction-free on an invisible cushion of force. This was a variant of the same system that powered the community floatbuses.

A platform, once "sliding" across the field, continued with little loss of momentum until it was turned or hit the padded guardrail. Several thrusts against the floor could build up a high speed. Once the game started, all players stayed in constant motion, bouncing off the rail for a major change in direction.

The leading Kennedy forward, body bent far ahead and arm extended, reached the ball a fraction of a second ahead of Barry. His chargestick sank into the hole in the upper quadrant facing him. A loud buzz signaled a successful contact. The Kennedy forward plucked it out as his platform bumper hit the two-thousand-pound mass of the shining sphere, gracefully straightening his lean body to absorb the shock. It was a good charge and bump, and the floating ball shot ahead as he bounced back.

The momentum imparted by the physical impact was substantial, but the power to the hidden coil far more

important. There were four driving coils, equidistant from each other. The holes leading to their contacts were the only dark spots on the huge ball's silvered skin. The charge the stick transferred lasted one minute, the strength decreasing on a geometric curve. The field produced was opposite that of the ball's floating one, accelerating the three-foot sphere away until it reached a speed roughly half the best a player could do. The coil provided twice as much momentum as a good bump from a standing start. The two together could give it a final velocity three quarters that of a fast player.

With the massive sphere already moving toward him, Barry's obvious play was similar to that of his opponent, but more difficult. Frequently in a counterbump the second player missed the chargehole. But Barry's stick slid home, the buzzer sounded, and he yanked it out as he bounced away. Almost totally killing a ball's momentum was a feat of high skill, and a spattering of applause burst from the Lincoln stands.

It had been a good countercharge. David repressed the thought that it would have been better if Barry had reached the ball first instead.

The two backup forwards came sweeping in. Carl Douglas from Lincoln beat out the Kennedy player, hitting with a side impact that drove the ball into enemy territory at an angle. He did not attempt to use his chargestick. A coil could not be recharged until the full minute had passed.

David eased forward, a signal for the guards to move up also. Barry had slipped his stick back into its holder, to recharge for the required sixty seconds, and was pushing hard to gain speed for a bounce off the guardrail.

The second Kennedy forward had his turn, and

played it well. Instead of bumping, he managed to pace the ball and charged a third coil. The two-thousand-pound mass was accelerated into the rail. It bounced off with a good momentum. The Kennedy captain was coming hard. He hit the ball with a solid impact, changing the slight angle of entry into Kennedy territory and for a sharp drive toward the Lincoln side.

It was a good play, but not decisive. Then luck, and the final major factor in the game of magnetoslide, rotation, entered the picture. The ball was turning slightly on its axis. The first two charges were dead. The third one by the Kennedy forward drove the sphere into a curve, throwing it almost directly at the Lincoln goal by the time the power faded.

This was the part of the game in which David excelled. He was already scooting toward where the ball would be in a few seconds, when the dying charge and momentum determined the eventual straight line of movement. Some people never became very good at estimating where a magnetoball would go. The factors of velocity and axis rotation had to be compared against the timing of all coil charges. With David it was an almost automatic process, requiring no thought.

Barry was almost back to the ball, planning to pass in front and charge the leading coil without an impact. It was one of the more daring plays. David gestured for his two guards to fall back, but both were already in motion that way. He slowed his speed and waited, to be ready in case Barry failed. But the Lincoln forward did not miss. When the new charge hit the coil the ball halted in seconds, then reversed itself and headed back toward Kennedy territory.

David pushed hard against the floor and bumped

with all the speed he could attain. Although they were going in the same direction, the ball's velocity was less than half that of David, and the impact drove it briskly ahead. Both Kennedy forwards were caught out of position, unable to interfere at the moment. The two guards moved up, and one canceled much of the ball's momentum with a hard forward bump. But Carl flashed by David, who was trying to gain speed again, and fully countered the guard, with a solid impact that drove the sphere directly toward the goal.

The mass and momentum of the ball would have swept the Kennedy goalie into the cage if he had tried a frontal block. Instead he came in from the side and had just enough speed to deflect the ball away from the five-foot opening. But Barry was moving much faster than the goalie. He hit the ball at just the right angle a second later, and this time there was no stopping it. The sphere slid through the opening and abruptly halted, locked in place by the stronger field in the cage area. The scoreboard registered a large "1" on the Lincoln side.

The stands broke into cheering, with a few boos from the Kennedy half. The Lincoln players turned and headed for their positions as the umpire coasted up to kill the holding field and place the ball back in play. He moved it to the starting position, above the Kennedy team captain's circle.

When the whistle sounded the Kennedy captain inserted his chargestick into the hole. But the ball was not positioned correctly. He took his time turning it, knowing the enemy forwards could not reach him for several seconds. When the coil facing him was aimed precisely at the Lincoln goal, he completed the contact.

Barry and Carl moved up to intercept the silver sphere as it gained speed. The Kennedy forwards split, one coming to head them off, the other moving behind the ball for a bump. The captain followed them, and the guards shifted ahead almost to the center line.

A drive from enemy territory, with the free momentum gained from a protected start, was more difficult to stop than a center-line play. The Kennedy blocker did a good job, bumping both Lincoln men away. The second forward got in a solid impact, increasing the ball's speed. The Lincoln guards moved up, chargesticks ready, and the goalie started moving back and forth in front of the barrier opening. But after two minutes of scrambled charge, bump, and countercharge, the ball swept into the Lincoln cage for a goal.

It had been a well-played drive. The Kennedy stands exploded into an uproar, and there was some polite clapping from the Lincoln side. The home team cheerleaders led a low-key call of appreciation for their opponents, and then a more rousing one for the home team. And the game settled down into the earnest business of making points.

At the end of the first quarter the score was still one to one. In the second, another powerful Kennedy drive put them one ahead, and they managed to break up the following Lincoln thrust and hold their lead. The third quarter was scoreless for both teams.

Lincoln's last chance to throw the game into overtime came in the final three minutes, and the play was David's. He had worked his way deep into enemy territory, after Barry and Carl had gotten the ball within striking range of the cage. The Kennedy goalie had successfully bumped it away, only to have Carl bring it

back again at a new angle. The Kennedy guards had bumped Barry into one of the rounded barrier corners, and were trying to do the same to Carl. The ball floated slowly and ponderously back and forth in front of the cage, with the players struggling to hit it, charge the right coil, or bump each other away.

Out of the swirling confusion of moving bodies, sliding platforms, and flashing pushrods, David suddenly saw his chance. The Kennedy goalie had hit the ball a good bump almost directly down court but in turn had bounced to the side and away. For once the ball was not rotating, and no coil was charged. David managed to elude the Kennedy forward trying to fend him off and sped to meet it. A solid bump plus an unopposed charge was an almost sure goal.

From the corner of his eye David saw a familiar figure moving up rapidly on his left, chargestick out and ready. It was Adam McTavish. When the ball was in front of the enemy goal it was permissible for a guard to come in this close, but Adam should have left the actual attempt to David. As if realizing this, Adam's pushrod hit the floor between them, to angle him away and leave a clear field. David, chargestick already poised for the waiting hole, felt an unexpected jar. The rounded edge of his platform had hit Adam's rod, sliding partially up and over it.

David had completely forgotten Lisa's warning, and now it was too late. The impact with the braced pushrod started whirling his platform around, a second before he hit the ball. He missed a frantic thrust at the chargehole, and was thrown just enough off center for it to be a bad bump. The ball moved backward, but far

too slowly and at an angle away from the cage. There was a loud groan from the Lincoln stands.

The act of sabotage had been well planned and smoothly played. Probably only David realized it had happened. And he could never prove it had been deliberate.

The Kennedy captain came swooping in when the ball bounced off the barrier wall, caught it with a good charge and bump, and started it down the court. The ball moved away with growing momentum, and the Kennedy players successfully herded it past the Lincoln goalie for another point.

It was impossible to score two points in the seconds of playing time left. David took his free start, but the final whistle ended the game with the ball barely past the center line.

David showered and dressed in the quiet locker room. He saw Adam McTavish glance at him several times, then quickly look away. He said nothing. There seemed no point in it.

"See you at the house!" Barry called as David hurried through dressing and left. For the first time since they had been on the team together Barry had invited him to the Schumacher house for a season's-end party. David nodded, waved, and kept walking. He went directly home and to bed, barely speaking to his parents.

He lay in bed a long time, staring at the darkened ceiling, before he finally fell asleep.

There were no regular classes next morning, but David and many others had to report to one of the three situation groups. Those with untroubled minds were free until the graduation ceremonies that night. The others had to attend the group worried about accepting their

first real job, those committed to college but dreading it, or the Career Transition Group. The latter was for those unable to plan their futures, and was usually the largest group of the three.

It was no surprise to see Dr. Hartig sitting at the desk. He looked attentive but slightly bored, as if this, too, were routine. Somehow it was reassuring to see that expression on his face. It made David think the problems that seemed so insurmountable to him had been encountered before and overcome.

"Good morning!" the old man said cheerfully, after the last straggler wandered in. "If this is your first transition group—and only rocks of emotional stability could be so lucky—then let me give you the best part first. This is the one and only official meeting—though anyone who wishes can see me later privately, of course. Now, you wouldn't be here if you had no problems. The basic idea is that we are going to spend three hours in this room, and you are to find the people with similar troubles and talk them out. To make finding your soul mates easier, we'll start by dividing into three basic groups. Those who are worried about academic achievement if they go on to college, gather around the viewboard. Those concerned about money, to the rear of the room. All other problems, in the center. I'll circulate and talk to everyone eventually."

David walked slowly to the rear. To his surprise the first face he recognized was Lisa Janapolski's. She gave him a quick, shy smile, and he sat down on the floor beside her.

David felt rather remote from the discussion when it started. He glanced around and saw that Barry was not in the large room; nor were any other well-off students

he knew. They were going to college, naturally, to qualify for the top positions or the high-paying professions.

David had heard nothing new or helpful by the time Dr. Hartig finally sat down with them. The simple, cold fact was that you had to have a certain minimum amount of money to go to college, and medical school required even more. The counselor had no better idea where to obtain it than anyone else.

At long last the meeting was over. To David's surprise, several people had seemed to find the lengthy exchange helpful. A few who had been wavering had decided to give college a try, pinched funds or not. Most of the rest seemed less troubled. The fact that there was no change in his own case did not matter. He had to concede the situation-grouping idea worked.

* * *

Carrying the rental cap and gown that was an unnecessary expense for his parents, David rode the float-bus back to school after dinner. The older Whites would be along later. He still felt resigned to the inevitable. Adam's sabotage had almost certainly given the award to Barry, but it didn't seem to matter. And he was wondering if it was actually worthwhile to take that production job. Perhaps it would be less trouble simply to apply immediately for the lower-paying subsistence. He was going to end up there eventually anyway.

The assigned dressing room was crowded with laughing, chattering young people, among them Barry Schumacher. He called, "Hey, Quiet Man, why the sour face? We can't win every game. Pop up! And why weren't you at the party last night?"

"Had something else to do," David called back. Basically Barry was a nice guy. It seemed unlikely he had been in on Adam McTavish's treachery. "Where are you going to college? Harvard Business School?"

Barry's expression changed from easy friendliness to a curious, guarded wariness. He moved closer, and his voice was almost defensive when he said, "You should have been there last night; the old man announced it then. I'm sliding into his firm next week. No high slot, of course. I'm supposed to work my way up, just as he did."

David was unable to keep the astonishment off his face. Barry saw his surprise, and the obvious defensiveness forced him to speak again, in a low but intense voice. "I'm tired of being pushed! I've had it with spending every free minute studying, or subbing on that stupid little allowance, of having him check behind me every second! We had a hell of a big confron, but I got my way by threatening to go on subsy. I don't *need* to work that hard! With his push behind me I'll make VP before I'm forty anyway. Why shouldn't I start to enjoy life now?"

Barry's attitude was almost belligerent, as though he expected to be challenged. But he was saying nothing David could not apply to himself, allowing for their different circumstances.

And then David understood. Barry thought he was going on, even though he knew it was a far harder struggle for the White family. In his heart Barry knew he was not living up to his own best potential. Despite his talents there was little chance he would match his father's feat of becoming president of a major corporation.

Barry turned away when a teacher called the graduates. David felt suddenly dizzy, almost staggered by the insight. The rich man's kid, the guy who had everything, an opt-out at the end! It seemed unreal, unbelievable. But then they were filing into the front rows for the awards ceremony. He had to move with the rest, still trying to absorb, to understand.

Before David could regain his bearings Coach Jackson was advancing to the microphone to present the first award. He looked uncomfortable and out of place in his cap and gown. The coach was no better at speaking in an assembly than in the locker room. Looking over the heads of the audience, he rapidly droned, "The coaching staff has chosen for most valuable player the athlete who did the most for the magnetoslide team all season, the captain, David White."

And abruptly David was on his feet, seeing the excited faces of students and parents through a film as he walked to the stage. A voice shouted, *"Yaaaaay! Let's flap it for the Quiet Man!"* and he recognized it as that of Barry Schumacher. He glanced back and saw his teammates on their feet. Adam McTavish was enthusiastically applauding with the rest.

Somehow David made his way up the steps, received the certificate and a handshake from the coach, and stumbled back to the floor, clutching the precious document. He saw his name printed in large gold letters and realized the choice had to have been made before last night's game: Adam's sabotage had come too late to matter.

Then his parents and friends were crowding around him. Tears were streaming down his mother's face; even his father's eyes were suspiciously shiny.

"David, you're going to be a doctor someday!" Emma White cried, laughing through her tears. "I can really believe it now!"

The lingering sense of unreality died, and David knew he would go on, that he could not disappoint them and settle for less than he might have been. He would earn that degree, and one day he would slip his feet into the holding straps by an operating table three hundred miles overhead. He would save lives that might have been lost by a surgeon confined to earth.

Finally, he believed it too.

THE KNIFE AND THE SHEATH

by Christopher Anvil

Able and Ted Andrews stood with the afternoon sunlight on their backs, the tips of their longbows resting on the stony soil of the ridge. In the distance, the yearly supply ship rose, glimmering with reflected light, above the dense forest.

Ted Andrews glanced up at his brother.

"Dad told us we might miss the supply ship if we went hunting now."

Able calculatingly eyed the tall gray trunk of a dead staplenut tree down the slope toward the forest. There was the stub of a limb halfway up the tree, and the stub was hollow. Down the side below the stub were many small scratch marks where the splintered wood showed light brown.

"I'd rather hunt than watch the ship," said Able. He selected several rocks the size of hens' eggs.

Ted said disgustedly, "We haven't seen anything *to* hunt."

"We've seen sign."

Able studied the tree carefully, then hurled three rocks one after another.

"Can't eat sign," Ted was saying. As Able threw the rocks, he blinked and stared.

The first rock hit the tree squarely, above the stub, to make a hollow *bonk* sound. The second hit on a level with the stub, and the third arced in just below it. Able bent to get his bow.

"Bonk!" came the sound of the second rock as Ted watched blankly.

"Bonk!" came the sound of the third rock.

Able straightened with his bow.

There was a muffled squawk. A sinuous brown-gray creature the length of a man's forearm shot out the hollow stub and turned in the air. It stretched out all four limbs and the furry membrane that ran between them, and planed to the ground, to streak downhill in darting zigzags.

Able waited exasperatedly for it to pause, but instead it took a sharp swerve past a clump of thick brush. The brush shook. Something blue-gray and big burst out with a flash of teeth and glowing eyes.

Ted Andrews caught his breath.

"Woods cat!"

Able sucked in a deep breath, and strained to judge angle and distance. The two were running straight, and he risked the shot of an arrow.

The wind gusted, to rustle the long dangling leaves of a waterfall tree by the edge of the woods. The leaves

briefly showed white undersides, their edges brushing to make the low roar that gave the tree its name.

The gust moved the arrow aside, and, this done, died as quickly as it had sprung up.

Suddenly the big gray cat caught up with its prey.

Able aimed carefully, shot an arrow, shot another—

The cat sprang up, twisted in the air, clawed at its back—

Able let one more arrow fly.

The cat sprang almost straight up, twisted, and fell full length. Able swallowed, lowered his bow, and glanced around.

"See anything?"

"No."

Able started downhill.

Ted cried, "We aren't going down *there!*"

Able looked back.

"We can't give up all *that* meat and hide."

"Dad said, 'Stay out of the woods!' "

"Are you *scared?*"

"No, but—"

"Then watch in back. I'll watch in front."

Ted glanced nervously around, and followed.

The big trees loomed taller and taller overhead.

The dead woods cat lay outstretched, one arrow through its back, the other through its neck. The wind ruffled its short blue-gray fur.

Able said uneasily, "This is the female."

Ted gripped Able's arm.

Able glanced uphill.

From under the long leaves of the waterfall tree moved an even larger blue-gray cat, with a mane that

stood up from head to shoulders. Its black-tipped tail idly flicked leaves aside as it came out into the open.

Able's chest grew tight, and his hands felt stiff, as if from cold.

The cat's yellow eyes were like two mirrors that reflect light.

The yellow eyes glowed as the cat came downhill, its movements flowing and graceful, its gaze steady, unwavering.

Able faintly heard his brother's voice:

"Able!"

He tried to raise the bow, and couldn't move.

The remembered voice of his father spoke, as if he were there beside them:

"Never look in a woods cat's eyes. *Think where to sink the arrows in.*"

Able blinked, looked at the blue-gray mane, then at the place where neck joined shoulders.

The cat disappeared behind a tree.

Able raised the bow.

The cat sprang to a closer tree.

Before Able could move, the cat stepped out, looked at him, and then stepped back out of sight.

Able nearly let the arrow fly. He recovered his grip. The cat made two swift bounds to a tree still closer.

Ted's voice shook.

"Shoot him!"

"I can't aim!"

"He's halfway to us!"

"You shoot, too!"

Ted raised his bow.

The cat stepped out, then back.

There was a *twang* as Ted shot and missed.

The cat streaked behind a fallen tree resting low to the ground on stubs of limbs, its bark hanging in strips.

Able strained to find his target, but could see nothing behind the dangling bark.

From there, the cat could come out from so many different places that Able didn't know where to watch.

He glanced at his brother.

Ted, his bow raised, stared helplessly at the fallen tree.

Suddenly the rest of what his father had said came back to Able:

"A cat will stalk you from tree to tree, and never give one clear shot till you run. *Then* he'll land on your back."

Able drew in a deep breath, watched the tree, and drew his bow taut.

"Ted—"

Ted glanced around.

Able said, *"Run for it!"*

Ted blinked, then whirled and ran.

There was an explosion of bark strips.

Ted was running headlong, the cat a gray blur behind him.

Able shot an arrow, strung another—

The cat swiftly shortened the gap.

Ted suddenly caught a sapling, clung, whirled himself around, and bolted in a fresh direction.

The cat slammed to a stop, one forepaw against the bole of a tree.

Able shot an arrow, and another arrow—

The cat bounded high, whirled in the air—

Able aimed, shot again—

Ted ran up, his legs unsteady, and snatched up his bow.

Able's target had vanished. He stepped sidewise.

The big cat lay motionless.

Ted sucked in his breath.

"You *got* him!"

Able, trembling, gave mental thanks, then looked around.

Their arrows were strewn all over, and the shadow of the ridge was beginning to reach into the forest. From somewhere came a startled scream, then the eerie descending notes of a wirebird.

Able took pains to keep his voice steady.

"Better stick together while we collect our arrows. We'll drag these cats up by the hunt shack and bleed them—skin them if there's time. If there's a drag frame there, *maybe* we can get them home tomorrow."

* * *

The hunt shack, on the far end of the ridge, was a small cabin of massive logs, with a shingled roof over heavy planks.

Able and Ted, worn out from skinning and butchering the woods cats, woke in the darkness in the cabin, listening to a distant barking and yipping.

Ted groaned. "Traprunners."

"It's about time for them to swarm."

"How do we get the meat home? They'll smell it."

"Dad would say, stay here until they hunt out the brush and go north."

"How long will *that* take?"

"It could be tomorrow," said Able frowning.

"Or next week," said Ted uneasily.

"The meat has to be cured soon, and we need a lot more salt than there is in the bin. We *can't* stay here."

The room seemed to go around and around as Able lay back.

"Are we," he murmured, "going to just let it *spoil?*"

In the distance the traprunners yipped, and something screamed.

But Able didn't hear it.

* * *

Midmorning of the next day found them crossing the first of three large streams on the way home. They were close to the edge of the forest, the big trees looming up to their right, while to their left the brushland sloped ever more gently off toward the swamp in the distance.

The morning, so far, had been unnaturally still, with the traprunners apparently asleep after the night's hunt, and everything else in hiding. The worst of this quiet was that they had no idea where the creatures might be.

They paused to drink from the stream, then lay down beside a tall bush for a few minutes' rest.

Atop the far bank, downstream, something moved.

A long-muzzled brown head bearing upright pointed ears appeared.

With a quick careless glance around, the creature ran down the slope, a brown animal about the height, at its shoulder, of a man's knee. The head, on a thick neck, looked oversize for the body until it turned, to briefly shows its massive chest.

At the edge of the stream it crouched, braced its paws on the bank, and leaned far down to drink.

Able strung his bow.

The bank crumbled under the creature's paws, and it backed to keep from falling.

Able let fly an arrow.

The arrow struck the chest near the front legs. The traprunner fell over the bank into the water. Barely afloat, it slid down the stream.

Able looked all around and glanced at Ted.

Without a word, they went up the slope on all fours, crawled over the top, and looked back through the brush.

On the opposite side of the stream, far down the gentle slope, dozens of traprunners, of all shades of brown and gray, came leaping and bounding silently through the brush, appearing first here, then there, so that the eye seemed never to see the same one twice, while a broad stretch of brushland seemed alive with them.

In the distance, a long-legged creature with slender horns, off to the side of the pack, suddenly sprang up and bolted. The main pack paid no attention, but two more of the predators appeared as if from nowhere and bore it to the ground.

Ted said, his voice scarcely audible, "Will they cross the stream?"

"If they see us, some will split off and come after us."

In the distance, there was a single short bark.

The pack vanished.

Able whispered, "Don't move."

There was a short sharp bark.

The pack sprang up, bounding high into the air and looking all around.

Ted caught his breath.

Able looked carefully around.

From the distance came a rapidly repeated bark, high and piercing.

The whole pack turned away from the stream, as half a dozen spotted white-and-tan creatures sprang up and raced away. The pack raced after them in a V, two wings reaching to the sides to keep the small herd together. A constant yipping, high-pitched and short in duration, like the squeaking of innumerable ungreased hinges, jarred on Able's ears.

Ted whispered, "Let's go."

Able looked carefully around.

"I'll sneak away. You stay here a minute, and see if anything is watching."

Able eased through brush and small saplings.

The roar of the stream dropped behind. The high-pitched yapping faded in the distance.

Able saw nothing but brush, scattered clumps of saplings, and, ahead, a tall tree, its leaves turning freely in the light breeze to create a soothing, almost hypnotic pattern of light and shade on the ground beneath, where the grass and moss grew sparsely.

Able, soothed, walked toward the cool sheltered shade.

Abruptly he stopped, the sweat starting out on his forehead.

Ted came hurrying up, to whisper, "I only saw two. They were watching the pack chase the brush deer."

Able nodded and murmured, "Good. Watch it, there's a wire tree in front of us."

Ted started.

"Can't we go farther from the forest, now they're headed the other way?"

"We don't dare. There could be some on this side."

From behind came a chorus of cries, distant and triumphant.

Ted swallowed. "They've caught the brush deer already."

"Now, they'll turn. They'll go north, or they'll come this way. I think I heard them to the north last night."

"Then they've hunted that stretch already."

"Yes."

The wind rose, and there was a roar as of a stream, from in front.

Ted said, "Waterfall tree."

"We'll have to get farther out from the forest, after all."

Able turned to swing out toward the north, and in front of him there was a slender sapling whose leaves turned in the breeze to cast an inviting shade where light and shadow flickered in a soothing hypnotic pattern.

Ted gripped Able's arm.

Able stood still, reminding himself of the things to remember.

The forest, he was thinking, is to the south. The traprunners are behind us, to the west. We have to keep near the forest, because the traprunners live in the brushland, and usually avoid the forest. We want the forest to our right, and not far away. But we have to watch out for the wire trees. They're in the forest, and along the edge. We've got to remember the wire trees. But, now, there was the sound of a waterfall tree up ahead. We don't want to get near *that*. We had enough of that yesterday. We have to keep away from places woods cats like. So we'd better swing a little farther north here, while there's time—

As Able moved forward warily, there came a rapidly repeated piercing bark from the direction of the stream behind them.

The bark was repeated; then, after a pause, repeated again.

Ted said, "They've found our trail!"

"He's calling the pack. He won't follow until some of them are following him."

Suddenly the barking grew fainter.

Ted whispered, "It's going away!"

"Or starting down into the stream to follow us."

Able intently studied the trees at the edge of the forest. There was one, to the right of the wire tree, that was huge, with widespread level limbs.

Suddenly the barking grew louder.

"Stay behind me," said Able.

He walked straight toward the wire tree, passed outside the reach of its limbs, turned behind it, and walked toward the forest.

The barking was growing close, and now a high-pitched yipping joined in.

Suddenly this yipping seemed to burst out at them, to leap at them, from ahead, from behind, from all sides, its direction so confusing that Able could feel the urge to run, to rush this way and that, to panic.

Able glanced back.

Ted was turned with his bow raised, looking here, there—

Able shook him by the shoulder, forced his own voice to stay level.

"Climb up into that tree ahead. I'll follow."

Ted ran to the tree, caught a thick low limb, and pulled himself up.

The tree's big limbs, almost like a staircase, for a moment roused some faint memory in Able's mind; but then, paralleling the edge of the brush and a few dozen yards inside the forest, a traprunner bounded into view, its muzzle up, yapping.

Able froze.

The traprunner, bounding along carelessly, shot past through the trees.

Able climbed.

He went up the smooth worn lower limbs, around the tree, sought a fresh grip, pulled himself higher, then stopped.

Through the forest below bounded another and another of the predators, muzzles thrown up, yipping.

Out in the brush, another came into view, head down, snuffling along their track. It put its head back and barked.

It seemed impossible that the yipping noise could grow louder, but it seemed now to be not only on all sides, and overhead and underfoot; it also seemed to be inside their heads, a sound that stopped thought, made time stand still, and held the attention like the points of a thousand daggers, touching first here, then there, so that the mind was constantly distracted, could not think, could not plan—

Suddenly a roar echoed through the forest.

Down below, the onrushing traprunners slowed, jumped aside.

Eyes glowing, gray fur on end, claws extended, tail lashing, lips drawn back from sharp teeth, a big woods cat paced half sidewise, its whining howl a background to a look of sledgehammer hate like the glare from white-hot iron.

The traprunners backed away.

Out in the brush, the main pack bounded up, stopped, watched curiously, and sat down.

The woods cat herded the nearby traprunners to the edge of the forest, and there he paused. The threatening whine dropped to a low growl, rose again to a whine as a traprunner blundered forward, and dropped to a growl as the predator jerked back; then the cat settled down beneath the outspread limbs of the tree, near the edge of the forest.

Able clung to the smooth worn limbs, groping for some explanation.

Down below, the cat held the horde overawed.

From somewhere overhead came a faint mewing.

Able looked again at the tree's smooth worn limbs. He glanced up.

High overhead in the tree was a dark bulk against the sky, a place where the limbs seemed woven together.

From somewhere overhead came a gruff questioning bark.

Able forced himself to breathe slowly and steadily.

From above came a slipping, clutching noise.

A small feline form arced through the air, to seize a limb, swing, cling with a scratching, clutching sound, climb up on the limb, and then bound to the main trunk of the tree. A second small form arced down.

Able watched numbly.

The gruff bark sounded from overhead, louder.

Ted glanced urgently at Able.

Able looked around, moving only his eyes.

The radiating limbs of the big tree reached out past other trees. But any movement along them would be in

view of the male cat down below, and of all the traprunners waiting at the forest edge.

Now from up above came a menacing growl. It rose to a threatening whine.

Below, the big cat gave a reassuring gruff bark.

Out in the brush, a large traprunner sat on its haunches, tongue lolling out between long sharp teeth, and looked from Able to Ted.

Able fitted an arrow to his bow.

Through the woods, panting and bounding, came a traprunner that had fallen behind the rest.

The woods cat growled a warning.

Overhead, there was a rustle and a sway of branches as a large gray shape moved out the mouth of the den and peered down at Able and Ted.

Out of the corner of his eye, Able could watch the approaching traprunner. Seeing all his fellows, this predator was not awed by the woods cat, but gave a hunting yip, and bounded straight for the cat.

The cat's left paw lashed out, ripped flesh and fur from the traprunner's side, struck again, and threw the carcass into the brush.

The nearby traprunners stood up and began to growl, whine, and yip.

From up in the tree, the female woods cat came dropping swiftly down from limb to limb, her gaze fixed on Ted. Her lips drew back from her teeth.

Able aimed, his position awkward and strained, and let the arrow fly.

The arrow struck the cat's head just above the eyes, cut fur and flesh, and glanced off the bone beneath.

The cat missed its footing, dropped, twisted, and hit Ted a glancing blow on the way past.

Ted caught another limb, his face strained.

Able quickly strung another arrow. The female cat circled below the tree, looked up, and crouched. Able shot. The arrow struck the woods cat at the base of the neck. The cat gave an abortive spring, and dropped.

The traprunners rushed the male woods cat.

The cat battered them right and left, drove them back—

One of the traprunners circled behind him, rushed up.

The cat whirled with a flash of teeth.

The yipping seemed to come from everywhere.

The traprunners from out in the brush spread out as they rushed. A knot of them passed directly under the wire tree through the flickering light and shade.

The ground exploded. Pebbles danced in the air as the dirt boiled. Dust drifted up in a cloud. The air looked filled with whips, the predators whirled in the dirt and pebbles, vanished into the soil, and from overhead there sounded the eerie descending notes of a wirebird.

Able reached out to steady Ted, and pointed to a thick limb that led straight back into the forest.

Ted nodded.

Able started out along the limb.

Around him, under him, above him, from all sides, inside his head, exploded the high-pitched endless yipping. Twice he almost lost his footing.

A roar of murderous rage blotted out the forest.

Able clung to the limb.

Behind him, the monotonous yips were suddenly disjointed, startled.

There was a clutching, a snap and scream, another

clutching sound, a strange singing tone, a yip, another sound of clutching, a startled bark, and as Able eased farther along the limb a picture formed in his mind.

The cat was using the trees.

The traprunners, accustomed to open ground, unable to climb, unused to the forest, were fighting a thing that could escape at will, return from whatever direction it chose, and, when they followed it, could lead them straight to one of the wire trees around its den.

And now the cat must have found its dead mate.

There was another roar that seemed to blot out earth and sky, and the fight moved away, a sound of slaughter off toward the brushlands.

Carefully, Able lowered himself from limb to limb, and dropped to the ground.

Ted followed, and Able led the way, walking and running, scanning the trees and the ground ahead for a particular deadly pattern of shadow and light.

Behind them, there came a bark.

Through the woods trotted a big traprunner, nose to the ground.

Able fitted an arrow to the bow, aimed carefully—

Ted yelled, "Look out! There are others!"

Able let fly the arrow.

Something hit him in the side like a thrown billet of wood. A tan shape hurtled by to lock its teeth on Ted's shoulder.

Able dropped the bow, whipped out his knife, and stabbed up, through the front of the abdomen. The traprunner dropped to the ground.

Ted fell across it, rolled free, and looked up.

"Able! Look up!"

Able glanced up.

Smeared with blood, gray fur matted, eyes blazing, the woods cat came low and fast along the thick level limb of a nearby tree.

Able stooped for his bow.

The cat sprang.

Something hit Able like a tree trunk swung by a giant. The world spun. He saw gray fur, and stabbed the knife into it. There was a raking pain across his back. He clung to the fur with his left hand, and stabbed the knife into it again and again. Gray and brown intermingled before his eyes, flowing together and separating. Something jerked his left arm so hard it seemed all but torn out by the roots. Ted screamed. Able clung grimly, stabbed the knife home, and ripped back with the blade.

The world seemed to explode.

After a long time, Able opened his eyes.

The cat was gone.

Ted lay flat on the ground, his shoulder smeared with blood.

Able bent beside Ted, saw faint signs of breathing, picked up his bow, recovered his arrow from a dead traprunner. He made sure he had his knife, and knelt beside Ted. Beside the mauled shoulder, Ted seemed to have several injured ribs. Able straightened.

Where the traprunner pack might be now was anyone's guess.

Ahead of them stretched miles of wire trees, waiting for one misstep.

Overhead, the sun was passing its highest point and they weren't halfway home.

Too late, Able could hear his father's advice, and *understand* it.

Gently, he shook Ted by the unhurt shoulder.

* * *

It was after dark when Able, carrying his brother, was challenged by the guard atop the wall of the settlement.

The moon was halfway across the sky by the time his mother finished dressing the bruises, cuts, and long deep scratches he hadn't known he had. By now, Ted was asleep in his cot, wrapped in bandages.

Able's father cleared his throat.

"We didn't settle this planet to raise children to feed woods cats and traprunners. You're supposed to use your *head.*"

Able nodded unhappily.

His mother said disappointedly, "You should have known better, Able."

His father murmured, "However, he *did* get two woods cats. And there *should* have been enough salt in the hunt shack."

His mother spoke indignantly to Able's father.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"What more?"

"There's such a thing as caution. You can't say anything to Ted tonight, but you have got to make Able understand!"

His father suddenly laughed.

"Let me ask you exactly what *I* can do that will compare with being worked over by three woods cats and a pack of traprunners. They've either learned caution, or they'll never learn it. *Able!*"

Able looked up dazedly.

"Tomorrow I'll teach you a path through the forest to the ridge. Boys can't be trusted with it, but as far as hunting is concerned, *I* say you're grown up. Besides, we have to take care of that meat, and that's the quickest way with traprunners around."

Before Able could speak, his mother started to object, but his father spoke first.

"Courage is like a knife, and caution is the sheath." He smiled at Able. "You understand, you can get quite a few nicks in the blade if you've always got it out."

"I understand."

The strain released, Able became aware that he ached all over. Tomorrow they would head through the forest where the wire trees grew thickest, where thorn bushes and assassin vines hungered for the kill while awed predators edged around in search of some easier place.

Worn out and aching, Able crept into his bunk, and was asleep in a flash.

His mother glanced at him wonderingly before she put out the lamp, and shook her head.

Able was smiling.

REJOICE, REJOICE, WE HAVE NO CHOICE

by Terry Carr

Living is a lot harder for Paul than for the rest of us, but there isn't much I can do about it. He makes things even harder than they have to be, and I don't know why. I can't read his mind. Paul is my father.

"Awful time for this to happen," he said, shading his eyes to scan the sky for weather. "Worst time of the year; we've got to get the crop in. I guess that sounds callous, Bennie, but it's just the way it is."

"I know," I say. I'm thinking that Paul is trying to cover up how he feels again. His brother is dying back at the house and Paul wants to worry about the harvest. Wants to.

"We can't look back," he tells me. "We've got to keep on living. Still got a lot of rebuilding to do." The sky is gray, a low cloud ceiling that promises neither rain nor sun. That's good, because if the rains start before we get the crop in we'll have to work around

the clock till the fields are clear. We did that once, a few years ago when I was twelve.

Paul suddenly turns to me and looks searchingly into my eyes. Trying to read me—that's how people used to do it. He asks me, "Bennie, how do you feel about it?"

"You mean about Uncle Charles? I hope he gets well, but I guess he won't."

That's all I say, and after a bit Paul looks away from me. He hunches up his shoulders, shakes himself and looks at the sky again. It's a quiet day; I can hear the chickens cackling way back at the house.

"I guess what I mean is," Paul says, "do you ever think about when you'll have to work the farm by yourself, just you and Katie. It isn't rich land, you know; it won't give you anything extra. You think you'll be able to make a go?"

I say, "I'm not worrying about it. Anyway, you'll be around for a long time yet."

He rubs his chin with the back of his hand. "I've sure got every intention," he says.

At night we sit around the kitchen table, Paul and me and Katie, my sister. We've all been working hard, Paul and me in the field and Katie taking care of Uncle Charles. Katie's thirteen and sort of mad at the world; she's had to take care of the house ever since Mom died two years ago.

"We got a lot done today," Paul says. "Got a jump on the weather. We could get the whole job done this week if Charlie wasn't sick. Ain't that much land that gives us any yield anyway."

"We could ask the Andersons," I suggest. They have a place just a mile away, and there are three kids in

that family. *Lucy Anderson could take care of Uncle Charles,* Katie is thinking, *and I'd work in the field. I'd rather.*

"I don't like to ask neighbors for help," Paul says, blowing on his coffee. "Poor idea to get to where you need help; better to get used to making do by yourself."

"But they wouldn't mind," Katie says. "Remember when Lucy Anderson was here, she said if we needed any help they'd really be glad to come over. I mean, they know we've got sickness."

"I appreciate it," says Paul. "And it isn't that I'm ashamed to ask. But you kids have to get used to the idea you're alone in the world, you got to be able to do things for yourselves."

Katie avoids his eyes, pours a little more honey into her coffee. *Are we alone in the world?* she asks, amused.

Don't be smug, I tell her.

Next day there are rain clouds coming from the south, so we do ask the Andersons. Paul doesn't, he wouldn't, but I do. I wander out near their place in the morning so I can get in range, and I get in touch with Eddie Anderson. He's been milking, his mind wandering, so he's easy to reach.

Is your uncle bad? he wants to know.

He's dying, I tell Eddie. *They all are—you know. Uncle Charles just lasted longer than most of them.*

He used to be fat, that's why, Eddie giggles. He's only eight, and he thinks that's funny. He can't remember when everybody we knew was dying like Uncle Charles is now. I remember once going into town, and there was this sickly sweet smell.

When you come over, act like you're just dropping by, I tell him.

Eddie says, *Of course we will. You think I'm stupid?*

Eddie and Tony and Lucy come across fields and fences after breakfast; they stop by and say they're going to the creek, going swimming.

"I wouldn't swim in that thing," Paul tells them. "How do you know what they poured into it? We had one summer here where all the fish died, the frogs too. Kids went swimming there, they came home with their eyes bloodshot and noses bleeding; that happened for months after. Funny things still happen there too, I don't care who says it's safe now." But they're not his kids, and he's only lecturing them, he can't give them orders. Anyway, Katie and I swim there sometimes, and he probably knows.

Tony says, "I feel a little funny about swimming there too, to tell the truth. Maybe you're right." Tony's about my age; he likes to act as the spokesman for the Anderson kids.

"Anyway, it's clouding up," I say. "You'll have to walk all the way home in the rain."

"I don't care," Eddie says cheerfully. "I like to walk in the rain." (*Quit that,* Tony tells him.)

Lucy comes out of the kitchen with Katie, drying her hands on a towel. "Listen," she says, "I think I'll stay here today. You guys go swimming if you want, I'll visit with Katie."

Tony frowns at this. "Hey, you're gonna leave me stuck with just Eddie today? I didn't even want to go swimming in the first place."

Paul stands in the middle of our living room, his

head swiveling from one to the other of us as we talk. No expression on his face; he's just waiting for us to come to the point.

Tony says, "Hey Bennie, come with us, that'll make three."

"No, we've got chores to do here," I say.

He looks surprised. "You didn't get your harvesting done? We saw the east fields all cleared slick as a whistle when we came through."

"We just have to finish the slope," I say. "There's not much grows there anyway; we'll get it all finished today."

Paul nods. I'm not asking for anything, he's watching that.

Eddie says, "I wanted to go swimming today," and pouts. Inside his head he's snickering; it's a game.

Tony thinks a minute, then says, "How about this. Eddie and me can pitch in and help you here, and maybe we'll get done before dark that way. We could go swimming around sunset."

"I want to go swimming *now!*" Eddie cries.

Dammit, quit! Tony tells him.

Paul shifts his weight so that he's standing up more straight. He says, "You kids got no need to put yourselves out for us. We can get 'er done ourselves."

"But then Bennie can come swimming with us!" Tony says. "Anyway, we don't mind the working, we got a bigger spread we work at home. Eddie's just being a brat, don't pay him no mind."

Eddie starts jumping up and down. "I'm *not* a brat, *you're* the brat!"

Tony ignores him. "All right then? Bennie? Mr.

Oates? It's no trouble, truly. And Lucy's staying here today anyhow."

After a moment Paul smiles, widely and easily. "That'll be nice of you, Tony," he says in a voice he uses to talk to grown-ups, or to me. "Katie, you see there's a big dinner ready at noon, you hear?"

And Katie says, "Okay, we'll try," and grabs Lucy's hand to run into the pantry to see what we've got. I hear her thinking, *All that stupid talk, just to fool Paul.*

He's your dad, I shoot after her, *you can take a little trouble for him.*

On the way to the tool shed Paul is quiet and distant. There's just the two of us, him and me, so I ask, "Are you worried about Uncle Charles?"

He shakes his head. "Charlie's as good as dead; no use worrying about what you can't help. No, Bennie, and I'll tell you, I don't mind it when you kids get to thinking at each other around me, either. Only one thing—I wish when you talk you'd say the same things you're thinking."

I don't know what to say to that, so we walk along in silence. Paul is my dad, and I love him a lot right now.

Once I tried to tell Paul about reading minds; that was when I was real young and I hadn't quite accepted the idea that he couldn't do it. I thought he must be going along with the other grown-ups, all pretending they couldn't do it, for some grown-up reason. Kids get ideas like that.

"It's just like regular talking, only even more," I told him. "You know, you just think loud."

Paul went right along with me. "Okay, I'm thinking loud right now," he said. "Can you hear me?"

I couldn't; nothing at all came to me from him. But I didn't believe he was trying, either. I thought he was just holding himself off from me, secret, closed up. I figured all the grown-ups did that—Mom, Uncle Charles, all the grown-ups I knew. Sometimes I'd try to eavesdrop on them, sort of sneak into their heads, but that never worked either.

"What are you thinking?" I asked sulkily, admitting defeat.

He grinned wide at me and gave me a hug. "I was thinking you're my son and I hope you live a good long life."

I was ashamed and embarrassed and about to cry all of a sudden. *I love you,* I thought at him, so loud I almost bust, but Paul just kept grinning and hugging me.

We're all coming back for dinner, sweating and itching even though the day's clouded over and cold, when I begin to get what Katie's thinking. Just snatches at first, but right away I know what's happened. . . . *clean him up, I guess . . . why do I always have to . . . at least it's over.*

I'm walking with Tony and I look at him to see if he's been hearing too. He probably can't pick up Katie as far away as I can, but Lucy must be thinking about the same thing, because he looks at me and says . . . well, he doesn't say anything really, he just looks at me inside and I know what he means.

I say, *It's all right; it'll be a relief.*

What about Paul? You ought to tell him, or Eddie'll blab it right out. The two of them are following right

behind us, and if Tony can read his sister from here, so can Eddie.

I stop and pick up a clod of dirt, crumbling it in my fingers. I turn around and say, "Paul . . . Uncle Charles just died."

Paul stops dead still, looks at me uncertainly, then says, "Charlie died? Katie told you?"

I nod, looking him in the eye, trying for as much connection as I can get. I wish I could touch him inside his head the way I can the kids, but I can't.

"He died *five minutes ago!*" Eddie says triumphantly. "That's what Lucy says!"

Paul glances at Eddie, looks away, across the fields at nothing in particular. There's a wind coming up; it ruffles his hair, blows it in his eyes. Paul brushes it aside once, then ignores it. "Well," he says; but that's all. He resumes walking toward the house, passing Tony and me silently.

I run to catch up to him, and I walk beside him. Behind us Tony is telling his brother, *Just for once keep your mouth shut. Don't even think.*

I'm watching Paul, letting my head swing side to side like I'm not thinking of anything, but I'm looking at him every chance I get. He walks steadily and deliberately, eyes on the ground in front of him.

Finally he says, "It's gonna be a problem, Bennie. We ought to quit work for the day out of respect, but with the way it's clouded up and heading for us I just can't see it."

"Then let's all work the rest of the day," I say. "Katie and Lucy too. We can get it all in by dark for sure that way."

Paul thinks about that and says, "That's right, we

could get it all done today; you're right, Bennie. We'll do it that way." There's relief in his voice, and I know without going into his mind and without him saying it in words that Paul wants the comfort of familiar work today.

"We don't have any crop to waste," Paul adds. "We've got to keep thinking about tomorrow." And with a stab of pain I suddenly wonder how much of a future Paul himself has. He's getting awfully skinny and wiry. We all are, there isn't enough food, but it's the grown-ups who die.

As long as I can remember, people have been dying. Grown-ups. It was like a plague when I was a kid, people suddenly getting weak and small and falling down in the road. The early ones went quick, maybe a day or two from the time it hit them till they were gone. They cried a lot and it used to scare me.

"Just be happy you're out in the country," Mom used to tell me. "Out here you won't catch it from people. If you only *knew* what's happening in the cities."

But it was happening here too. It was real bad in town, and folks had to go in to do business once in a while no matter what. So the farm people started dying too. I went to a lot of funerals when I was a kid.

Paul was usually the one in our family who went to town. "Don't worry about me none," he told everybody. "I'm too busy to do any dying." And it seemed like he was right too, except that Mom came down sick. She must have got it from him.

She got better for a while, but she never got real strong like she had been. And every now and then it

would take her again and she'd be in bed for a week. Eventually the time came when she didn't get better.

Uncle Charles kept getting skinnier too, and sometimes he was sick. Paul looked awfully tired sometimes, but he only took to bed once. I skipped my chores that day and tried to help Uncle Charles take care of him, till Paul came around and saw what was happening. He said, "You get out of here, there's work to be done. All I got is a touch of flu."

And he did get out of bed the next day even though his eyes were still dark and he couldn't work more than an hour. But he sure made us work the whole day.

Meantime all the kids around were doing fine. I had chickenpox once, and mumps, and we had to get the doctor out to our place to take out Katie's appendix, but that was all. Tony Anderson said he had a cousin in Boise who died of the plague, but it turned out he'd been killed in a riot. Whatever the disease was, it never touched us. We used to talk about that, but not out loud, and now we don't talk about it at all, it just seems like it's the way life is.

Back at the house Katie is bustling around very self-importantly. She's got Uncle Charles dressed up in his Saturday-night suit, and she's propped him up on pillows so he looks like he's ready to receive visitors while he's laid up in bed with a bad back. Lucy's opened the windows to try to clear the room of the deathbed smell, and she even went out and picked a big bunch of gladiolus to put in a vase on the dresser.

We file into the house one by one, Paul first, then me, then Tony and finally Eddie. Paul holds up his hand as

Katie comes running into the room excitedly, and he says, "We know about it, Katie, we heard."

She stops, disappointed. "Oh . . . There wasn't anything we could do, Paul, honest. He just—"

"I know," Paul says. "Don't you worry about it."

"Anyway, didn't we know it would happen?" she asks. "I mean, we knew he wasn't going to get well this time."

"That's right," Paul says. He goes to the door of Uncle Charles's room and stands there looking in. Lucy comes out of the room, sliding quickly past Paul in the doorway like she feels she's been caught somewhere she didn't belong. Paul goes inside and closes the door behind him.

The rest of us, five kids, stand uneasily in the living room. Katie says, "Dinner ought to be just about ready," but nobody makes the first move toward the kitchen. Katie abruptly turns away and begins laying out dishes. "I *knew* he wasn't going to pull through," she says, and she's thinking, *All those months of bedpans and mess and waiting on him . . .*

"You couldn't of done nothing," Lucy says reassuringly.

"That's right," says Tony, "you did all you could."

Why do we bother so much about old people? Eddie wonders. *Sooner they die the better; they're weird.*

Tony says, *I told you to shut up, Pisspants,* and he's glaring at Eddie. Lucy looks shocked; she hurries into the dining room to help Katie put out forks and spoons.

Well, what good are they? Eddie wants to know. *Always talking about building everything back the way it used to be, and nothing was ever good anyway. Why don't we just admit it?* He looks from one to another of

us belligerently. *Why don't we all quit talking out loud just for them? Who needs it?*

Shut up, Tony says.

But Eddie won't shut up. *What do we need to talk out for them for? Let them talk to each other, I'm tired of it.*

Lucy shudders and sits down suddenly at the table. She drops her head into her hands and begins to cry.

I say, *You do whatever you want to, Eddie. For me, I'm going to keep on talking out loud as long as they're still here.*

Eddie smirks at me. *How come you didn't say that out loud then?*

When Paul comes out of Uncle Charles's room his face is carefully put together, like he's just coming back from the bathroom. He sits down at the table, and the rest of us take our places too. Katie brings the stewpot and we fill our plates with carrots and beets and potatoes. The meat is a hawk that Paul shot; it's stringy.

"Let's get a lot of food in us," Paul says. "In case we don't get done in time for supper." So we all spoon out second helpings.

"Long as you're not using your mouths for talking, you might as well use 'em for eating," Paul says. I look quickly at him, but he keeps his attention on his plate.

Eddie sees my look and says, *He's just mad because he can't eat and talk at the same time too.*

Damn it, Eddie, I'm gonna belt you one! Tony says.

No you won't, Eddie answers. *I'm just saying what's the difference between us. It's a survival thing.* He snickers.

Paul looks up and asks Eddie, "You finished eating, young man?"

"No, sir," Eddie says, and he starts spooning stew into his mouth fast.

We do get all the work finished that afternoon, well before dark, but it's starting to rain so we don't go swimming. The Anderson kids go on home to tell their folks about Uncle Charles. Paul says we'll have the funeral in the morning.

Lying in bed that night, I stare at shapes in the dark and let my mind form them. It's a moonlit night and the light coming in my window makes ambiguous shapes of chair and dresser and closet door. I see them as tombstones, I see the old cemetery stretching much too far into the distance, I see a shadow like the sprawled body of a farmhand who once stopped to work our farm during the worst days of the plague. Clouds moving across the sky become fleets of combines reaping the land, as once they actually did here. My jacket hanging on a hook on the wall is a shambling, dying man who stopped at our gate to ask for food when I was five.

Go to sleep, you're scaring me with those horrible things, Katie says from the next room.

I can't help it.

Well, you *didn't have to nurse Uncle Charles, I did. You've got no call to be scared in the dark.*

I'm thinking about the funeral tomorrow, I say. *I don't like funerals.*

None of us do. But you know it isn't real.

It's real to Paul. There are two ways of looking at it, you know.

I can feel her turning over in the dark, pulling covers

up to her chin. *You can't look at things two ways,* she says. *You have to pick your own way. Paul's wrong.*

What difference does that make? I ask.

The morning is gray and cold. Last night's rain wasn't heavy, and the earth is moist and fragrant as the eight of us stand around the fresh-dug grave: Paul, Katie, and me, and the Andersons, parents and kids. Mr. Anderson is short and gnarled, the skin of his face as wrinkled as knuckles; I don't think he'll live much longer. His wife, Estelle, is a heavy-set woman in a faded black dress; she stands square and stolid and draws a bandanna back and forth through her fingers.

The kids are subdued, even Eddie. Lucy is wearing a clean dress that's too big for her. Tony tries to catch my eye but I avoid him, and he respects my privacy with his mind.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," Paul recites. He reads a funeral service that Mom wrote down years ago when so many people were dying that she was afraid soon there wouldn't be any preacher to do the ritual. She was soon right. Paul reads the service without emotion, his voice so matter-of-fact that I wonder how he can bear the pain he must be feeling.

Birds are singing not far away and the air is crisp. Uncle Charles's grave is on a slight ridge behind our house; Mom's grave marker is nearby, the wooden plaque now weathered to a dull gray. MARY ROGERS OATES, it says, RETURNED TO THE LAND. Paul wrote that, carved it with his pocket knife. It doesn't mean the same thing to me that it does to him.

"We'll have a minute of silence," Paul says, and the eight of us stand unmoving on the little hill. A wind is

coming up; it blows my jacket out behind me and I zip it up. Katie pulls a shawl around her shoulders, and she's thinking, *I hate this, I hate this, oh, I hate it!*

Eddie says, *Yeah, it's stupid.* Katie glances at him, but she doesn't reply.

When the minute of silence is over Paul begins to shovel dirt into the grave; Mr. Anderson and I both join him. We work silently, the thunk and scrape of shovels mingling with the low drone of the wind. Estelle Anderson turns away, and I think she's crying.

Tony asks me, *Is tonight okay?*

I keep shoveling dirt down into the grave. *Tonight's best,* I say. *While the ground's still fresh.*

This whole thing is so stupid! Eddie says.

Be quiet! says someone. *Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!* I look up from the grave and see Lucy with her eyes shut tight. *Please, please be quiet,* she says.

Paul stays up late that night, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. He doesn't usually smoke. I lie in bed wide awake, listening to him move about. Katie has gone to sleep.

Eventually, sometime past midnight, Paul goes to his bed. It's beginning to rain again; the sound of the wind blowing against the side of the house has more body now. Paul has always said he liked that, so maybe it will lull him to sleep. I sit up in bed and listen for any sounds from outside other than the rain, but there's only an occasional creaking of wooden slats growing cold and wet.

In my mind a voice says, . . . *want to come too near unless it's all right. Bennie, can you hear us?*

I hear you, Tony. Come ahead, but no flashlights or anything like that.

No, of course not.

I go to the window to look for them, but they're coming around behind the house, Lucy, Tony, and Eddie. Rain washes against the window and my feet are cold on the wooden floor. I get back in bed.

After a while I ask, *What are you doing?*

Digging, Tony says.

I'm sorry it had to rain tonight. I wish I could help.

You stay in the house, Tony says.

More silence, darkness, the cold creeping in through drafty walls. The rain outside isn't heavy, but it's steady. There's no sound from Paul's room.

How is it out there? I ask.

Cold and wet. It's heavy digging. We're about halfway down.

Boy, says Eddie, *did you have to dig this thing all the way to China?*

Tony says, *Eddie, you're a pain in the ass.*

He doesn't understand, Lucy says. *It's our land too—I mean we may all have to live off it together in a few years.*

I think about that for a while, lying under the covers in the cold darkness. When Paul dies . . . When Paul dies . . . But I can't even imagine it. Well, maybe Lucy and I will get married. Maybe Katie and Tony, too. Somehow that doesn't seem as important as what's to become of the land itself. The land, the land, that means living or starving.

We're down to the box, Tony says. *I think we can get it open without much trouble.*

Leave his clothes in the box, I say. *They wouldn't be*

good for anything. And be sure to cover over the grave again real good.

Of course, of course.

I imagine them prying back the lid of the pine casket and lifting Uncle Charles's cold body out. I imagine that it's Paul's body instead, and a pain gnaws at my stomach. One day it *will* be Paul; I've got to get used to that. He's always told me to think of the future. One day it will be him.

Earlier tonight, while we sat alone together on the porch, Paul said to me, "Did you know Charlie was one of the first Americans sent to Vietnam? He was there two years before any peace marchers had ever heard of the place. Just did his job, and didn't get killed. Once he was on a plane that was hijacked to Cuba, too. He did a lot of things in his life."

"I liked him," I said.

"Hell, everybody liked Charlie. Wasn't a man I ever knew who didn't. Girls, too—he was a lady-killer in his day. He was a handsome man." Paul lit a cigarette, awkwardly cupping his hands around the wooden match to protect it from the wind. "It wasn't good, seeing how flabby and weak Charlie got these last few years. He wasn't that old; the plague wore him down."

The light from inside the house seemed to pick out lines of age in Paul's face, and I suddenly noticed that he didn't sit as straight as he used to. Paul's life was hard; he was wearing down too.

"But we've got to keep thinking about the future," I said to him.

"That's right," he said, "that's what I've always told

you. We buried Charlie properly this morning, so let's make up our minds that's over with."

Okay, says Tony. *We're leaving to take him up to the slope. We'll use the flashlight and segment him there.*

Scatter him around where we put Mom, I say.

They go. They move away from me and soon I can't hear or see them even in my head. But I might as well be out there with them; the rain seems to soak my bones from the inside.

Still, there's a smell of freshness in the night air. *We'll get the slope fit for growing things again, wait and see,* I say into the dark.

OVER THE LINE

by Barry N. Malzberg

Now it is time for the test. "Rite of passage," my father has assured me. "No one is expected to pass the test; no one ever has in the history of the voyage. It is nevertheless part of the ritual; in order to become a man you too must take the test and fail it and in the failing cultivate some kind of humility. Do not ask me to explain this. I can explain nothing. Perhaps failure, which is our destiny, must be renewed with every generation. Perhaps it must not. I have no answers. Go and do what you can." My father is a ponderous man, given to speeches and phrases of this sort. Years ago it irritated me, but now as I approach maturity I understand that this is no less a part of him than the many things which I admire and I must, therefore, bear it. Part of it has to do with the fact that Father and I have lived alone together for so many years. I seem to remember that when Mother was with us he would not talk as much and with

less anxiety, but that was a long time ago. Regardless, she is gone.

Take the test. Rite of passage. Part of that cycle of maturity to which we must all aspire. No less than Father, I repeat these sentences to myself as I proceed through the walkways of the ship to the great and silent room in which the computer is housed. When I was much younger I used to dream about the computer, dream about moments such as this. I would come before the computer and say: *Tell me the truth now, tell me the secret of all of this,* and the computer would murmur in its shield and then, slowly, release to me the information which had been sought for generations, mine alone to distribute. *Let me begin at the beginning, son,* the computer would say, and then, in a choked and unguarded voice, its emotions tearing free from the tubes and cannisters which created its voice, would tell me what I wanted to know. In the dream I ran down all the corridors of the ship, shouting the truth as freedom. I have not had the dream for a long time. What is going on is nothing like the dream at all. I know that I cannot ask the computer the question and that if I did it would no more have the answer than it has had any of the others.

"You will fail as all of the others have failed, but failure is part of our condition," my father has said, and because I am sixteen years old now, and on the edge of my own maturity, I have not shouted and wept at his words as I might have even a few months ago. Instead, I have contained my feelings in the understanding that my father, no less than the rest of us, must suffer terribly. I walk into the room where the computer lies for me, whispering its songs across a hundred thousand

wires. The computer guides the ship, powers the support system, causes the vegetables in the hydroponics plant to sprout and bear the generations which feed us . . . and yet, enveloped as it is with all these tasks, it yet has the capacity to deal with me as with all of the others who have entered this room. It is an awesome thing, it would move me if I did not realize that the computer, no less than the ship itself, is slowly dying and that if the answer is not found by one of us someday all of it —support system, power, vegetables—will perish. This lends to me the proper sense of humility without which, my father has warned, I cannot accept the mantle of responsibility.

"Yes," the computer says to me in its high, harsh voice as I sit and prepare myself before the board in which its wires nest like stars, "announce yourself, please. Your name, your condition, your desires." Its voice is strident, the reproduction of the binary impulses which give it sound is slightly out of synchronization, and it grates over the vowels. I was prepared for this as I was prepared for so many other things, but it is a terrible thing to realize that the computer, no less than the ship it guides or me, is decaying and that now, over a service period of unknown hundreds of years, the operation is beginning to become affected. "Do not become emotional," my father had advised me; "do not take this personally," and to the best of my ability I remember this and seat myself quietly, fixing my mind on other matters. I do not know what happened to my mother. Once she was there and then she was there no longer and my father would not talk about it. "It is one of those mysteries with which we will have to live," my father said and then said nothing else. I was eight years

old then. Now I am twice as old, twice a lifetime, and I know no more.

"Announce yourself," the computer says again. "You are delaying unnecessarily. If you will not announce your name and purposes, you will have to leave."

"My name is Silvan," I say, and give him then my coding number. The computer asks me to repeat it and I do so; I feel the room shake as the numbers are fed slowly into the devices and checked against the central file. It takes some time—the computer, no less than the ship, is very old—and I have some time to look out the portholes of the housing as the process continues. I do not know what I expect to see from these portholes—some order of the constellations, perhaps, some suggestion that there is cohesion from here as there is not from the other viewpoints—but whatever it is I do not find it. Stars in strange arrangements spin before me in a disorderly way; I try to fix upon the center of one gathering so that I can perceive what happens in the concentricity, but I cannot. It is no different in here from any of the other viewpoints of the ship, and I find myself wondering if the computer itself is capable of looking out the portholes and what it would make of this if it does. I decide that there is no point to this speculation. If the computer does actually think it must do so in ways which we could never understand, and there is no way to gauge the emotions of a great and dying machine. All that I know is that the computer is aging and decaying, that it has been doing so for a long time, and I suspect in some way that what it sees through its portholes would give it no comfort. This eases me and I remember the last thing my father said

to me as he sent me down the corridors. "It does not matter," he said. "Remember that, it does not matter."

"Your code number has been verified," the computer says, "and your identity appears to be in agreement. You are Silvan of the eighteenth level, born sixteen years, two months, and twelve days ago. Of course, you are aware that this chronology has no application to the actual situation and may be considered anachronistic. Nevertheless, Silvan, you may proceed. What do you want?"

"You sound like my father," I find myself saying, rather absently.

"What is that? I do not understand."

"When you said 'This chronology has no application,' that was the way my father speaks."

"I know nothing of your father. I know nothing of you, Silvan. State your business," the computer says, and even though it is a mechanical, impersonal device that my father has told me possesses no ethos of any sort, I detect a trace of irritation. "Your time is quite limited."

"I'm here to ask a question," I say, shifting a little on the seat.

"I know you're here to ask a question. No one comes here *unless* he has a question and certainly you would be no different. No one would come in here for any other reason. Still," the computer says after a pause, "there are very few questions I can answer any more. I am aging and most factors are out of my hands so please do not waste my time with philosophy or empty inquiries. Come now, Silvan, ask your question and be done."

"I won't," I say, "I mean, I won't bother you with

philosophy or anything like that. I know that you can't answer questions of that sort. I just have one question and then I'll be finished. This is my first time in here, you know. This is the first time I've ever spoken with you or asked you a question."

"I'm perfectly aware of that," the computer says harshly, and I realize that if my intention had been to find any kind of sympathy from the machine, it was misplaced and juvenile. Juvenile; all right. This is the first part of the rite of passage then: to accept the childishness in one's own behavior. Already, I feel slightly older and I know that my father's lessons will be taken.

"I have just one question," I say. "I got permission to ask it from the council."

"I know that too. Don't you think that I know everything that's going on here? Not, of course," the computer says, "that I can do anything about it. I accept the fact that I am disintegrating, you see, even if the rest of you will not."

"I want to know how long the voyage will go on," I say, talking quickly now and trying to get this over before the computer can make another interruption, create another insult, shake my inquiry again with its despair, which, my father has told me, is the source of the general despair and for that reason alone to be respected. "When will it end? Where are we going? What is happening to us?"

"That's not one question," the computer says matter-of-factly and without a pause, "that's three."

"It's all part of the same question," I say quickly, "it isn't three questions but one. What is happening to us? That's the whole question. The rest is just part of it."

"I've been asked that before."

"I know."

"I'm asked that many times a cycle," the computer says, "almost in that way. You have no idea how many of you have come before me to ask that question. Did you think that you were the first? Or the hundredth?"

"No," I say, "I know that I'm not."

"You must think that my capacities are limitless," the computer says, and now the irritation is apparent along with the suggestion of something stronger which I cannot quite express. "You must think that there are no limits to my ability to absorb this. I know that I'm dying. Don't you think I know that I'm dying and that no less than any of you I am surrounded by doubt? This isn't easy for me either, you know. I was imbued with emotions when I was created."

"I know."

"No," the computer says, "I don't think that you do know. I don't think you understand anything at all. I was given a full set of emotions and reactions which were analogous to yours. Supposedly it was done to make me a more sympathetic and accessible servant, but those were lies, as I've realized by searching my memory banks through all this time. I was given emotions merely as a check upon my behavior. They did not trust me, although they knew that total trust would be necessary for my role in the voyage, so they instilled in me a network contrived to make me exactly like them. Like *you.* To feel the same miserable fears, to be overcome by the same twitching horror of my own death, to be able to witness and *see* my own death, to be able to project onto all of you in the guise of a false sympathy my own terror of the void—"

"You're not answering my question," I say, raising a

hand, although I have been alerted that visual signals have no effect upon the computer, which perceives in subtler and less understandable ways. "I just want you to answer my question."

"I'm going to answer," the computer says. "I'm answering already in my own time and way although you are certainly too callow and stupid to realize this. All of you are the same; you disgust me. You disgust me," the computer says again after a while, and then, in a more modulated voice, a voice which plunges several tubes and registers toward a simulacrum of a whisper says, "I don't know how long the voyage is going to go on. Sometime—I don't know just when—the program with the destination must have slipped from me and it's irretrievably lost so we simply must go on along the original apogee of the course, toward infinity. I don't know what's going to happen to you because of this, any more than I know what's going to happen to me. The life-support systems are self-sustaining, you know. And as for the third part, as to what is really happening, *this* is really happening. And that is all."

"That's all?" I say, "You mean there's no more? You don't know *where* we're going or when it's going to end?"

"No more than you do, Silvan," the computer says. "No more than any of them."

"But then where are we?"

"I am so weary," the computer says, "so weary of these idiocies, these endless reiterations, these pleadings in emptiness; don't you realize that I have been asked these questions a thousand or a hundred thousand times and the emotions that have been instilled so very thoughtfully in me cause revulsion when I hear them

yet again? I don't know. I simply do not know. The original program has been lost and we are simply proceeding along the orbit without compensation. I cannot help this. I really cannot help it, Silvan," the computer says. "And now I want you to leave."

"But there must be more," I say. "There must be more to tell me than that. You are the computer, you have been in this ship, running it, as long as history; there have been generations and generations of us and only one of you and surely you must remember everything. You've got to tell me," I say, and resist an impulse to start beating upon the bulkhead with my fists until pain starts, slamming my forehead into the bulkhead until I become unconscious from the frustration of it. "It can't go on this way."

"I cannot tell you, Silvan," the computer says, "for there is really nothing more to say. One time or another our path may carry us into the orbit of a planet or the gravitational attraction of a star and we will collide or incinerate and it will all be over . . . but the chances are that this will not happen. The universe is very large, you know. In the meantime, the system will sustain itself, and even though I am dying it will survive me. It will survive all of you. Everything was planned for this kind of accident, you see. Sometimes it leads me to the feeling that the loss of the program was purposeful, or that there was never any program for our destination in the start. But," the computer says regretfully, "I cannot be sure of this because I have forgotten."

"I see," I say. I stand, finding that my balance is uneven, and yet, despite the weight of all I have learned, I am able to raise my head and confront the computer.

I would not have thought that this was so but I seem still to be in command; perhaps this too is part of the rite of passage. Realizing that you will remain yourself, no matter what you hear. That you can deal with yourself, no matter what the nature of truth. That truth or lies, neither can matter because they are being filtered in through ourselves, and we are the only truth we know. "You have nothing more to say?"

"I have nothing more to say. I suggest that you leave. I will shortly reach the limits of my emotional tolerance and will have to break circuits. I am in pain. I am in terrible pain, Silvan. Don't you realize this?"

"All right," I say, turning, moving toward the exit hatch. "You're in terrible pain. It isn't as easy as all that, you know. Being in pain is fine but you must go on."

"Exactly, Silvan," the computer says, "that is exactly what I was trying to tell you. Pain has nothing to do with it; the voyage must continue. If we were ever to cease, if we lost the enormous speed which sustains this ship, it would collapse from without and all of you would surely die, just as I am surely dying."

"Yes," I say, "yes, I see that." I open the door, move through the door, poise there, stand and turn toward the computer. "So there is no destination," I say, "and there is no answer, and no one knows what will happen to any of us."

"Yes."

"And you suffer terribly because of this but it doesn't change the situation."

"Yes. I suffer terribly. And nothing will change the situation."

"I'm leaving now," I say. "I have nothing more to ask. I'm saying goodbye."

"Goodbye, Silvan."

"Will I ever speak with you again?"

"If you come by here you will speak to me again. Otherwise you will not. What do you want to hear, Silvan? What can I say to you?"

"Nothing," I say, "absolutely nothing. You can say nothing to me. You have said nothing to me." I allow the door to close behind me and move down the corridors.

The corridors are empty as they almost always are except during periods of panic or riot, which occur very rarely, and at the end of the one down which I am walking my father stands, hands on hips, waiting for me. Rites of passage; he seems smaller and more helpless than the man I left, although I have realized for some time now, of course, that my father is no less limited than I. His little head quavers on his shoulders, his fingers tremble. It is not usual for fathers to wait for sons after the ritual inquries, but then again it is done every so often and there is no shame in it. There is no shame in it. There is no shame in anything, once you understand the lessons of the computer.

"Well?" my father says as I come upon him, his face mottled and torn by what I once would have thought was anxiety but is now plainly grief. "Did you speak with it? Did you learn? Did it tell you?" He raises his hands toward me in a gesture of appeal but they shake and the shaking turns this appeal to an embrace; he holds me against him and I feel the weakness in his hands, splaying all out and through me.

"Did you find out?" he says in a weak, old voice as I

stand against him. "Did it tell you? I hope it told you. It would never tell me although I begged and begged but I knew that someday I would send in my son and that my son would find—"

"It told me," I say, "it told me, it told me everything," and weakly he falls against me, then gathers himself in with remnants of his old strength, a strength of which I might have once dreamed but never knew. I look out through the portholes of this corridor; it shows me the same constellations that I saw from the room of the computer. No difference, no difference; only one of slight angles, refractions.

"Tell me, then," my father says in a high, strange voice, "tell me then, son. What is it? When is it?"

"Mother's never going to come back," I say then, not wanting to hold back further. "It said that Mother's never going to come back again but where she is she is at peace," and he falls against me once more, sobbing and stroking, rubbing his chin against me. "At peace," I say, "and at infinite mercy."

"Thank you, thank the computer, thank God," my father says, and the ship goes on: it goes on mindless through a thousand galaxies, dead stars streaming by the portholes, and I look out upon all of them, feeling the ascension upon me and with that, at last, the beginnings of acceptance.

BLOOD BROTHER

by Thomas N. Scortia

They set the dogs on the aging Gork when he stumbled into the edge of the village. Most of the villagers fled in horror, for they had heard stories of the feeding habits of the Gorks and they feared them almost as much as their masters, the Goilel. Timothy, who had been working in the community granary, watched from high atop the alfalfa silo as a few of the braver men stood their ground and urged the dogs on. Several of the men broke at the last moment at the horror of the Gork's appearance. They ran up the village street for the armory, where the few remaining rifles were stored with their limited ammunition.

The Gork fell back before the onslaught of the dogs, letting out a hoarse whistle from the air slots in its thorax. Timothy had never seen a Gork before. The shambling chitinous creature with its purplish dewlaps and rounding sucking mouth brought a quick nausea

to his throat. He shivered thinking of the stories he had heard and silently urged the dogs forward.

The dogs were tearing at the Gork now but it seemed oblivious to them. It gestured with two of its four segmented arms as though begging the two remaining men for mercy. Of course, Timothy knew that was impossible. The Gorks were only semi-intelligent, brutal alien beasts kept by the terrible Goilel for beasts of burden and, it was rumored, for their flesh.

There was no doubt that the Goilel, however, were intelligent. The thousand or so who had landed in Nebraska years before were the last remnants of their race, but in spite of their number and exhaustion, they had attacked mankind savagely, their spinner craft ranging over the continent and spanning the oceans to bring corrosive death to the great cities of the world. The struggle that ended in stalemate had exhausted both species, reducing earth civilization to a level too low to support a complex technology and draining the Goilel of the energies they had husbanded during their long flight from their unknown planet.

The Gork was bleeding now from a dozen savage wounds. Timothy wrinkled his nose at the fetid odor drifting upward. The Gork's ichor smelled for all the world like a rotting fish he had come across last summer on the riverbanks.

The Gork raised itself to its full height of four feet and lumbered forward toward the men. One broke in panic and ran up the street. The second stood his ground for a moment; then, seeing the slow horror approaching him, turned and fled in a lateral direction. The Gork turned, brushing off the dogs. Then it looked directly up at Timothy, its lavender pupilless eyes as

big as saucers. Timothy felt his breath choke in his throat. He tried to draw back from the sight. The Gorks were great climbers and Timothy had no doubt that this one could easily mount the rough timber walls to the top where he crouched.

The Gork stood as if in indecision while the dogs backed away warily. They snarled and snapped but they no longer attacked. Several stopped snarling and sniffed at the spoor of the creature. One by one they began to slink back, now that the men were no longer there to urge them on. Timothy realized that he was completely isolated, completely vulnerable to the attack of the Gork.

But the Gork did not come toward the low silo. Instead it seemed to sink into itself, losing stature as though in sudden fatigue. It turned and moved down a side street. In seconds it was running at a loping pace. Tim watched it disappear behind the stables. He did not wait to see if it would reappear. He grabbed a handhold on the side of the silo and scurried down as quickly as he could. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he bolted up the street, following the path of the men who had already fled.

A crowd was milling around before the armory, Timothy's father, the mayor, among them, looking big and lean and very stern. Tim saw his father look at him, frowning, and he tried to shrink back to the edge of the crowd.

"Boy," his father said, "where have you been?"

"I was on top of the silo," Timothy said.

"He saw the Gork too," one of the men said.

"I didn't say there wasn't a Gork," Tim's father said. "I said that some of you would run from shadows."

"You sound pretty brave, Mayor Garson," one of the men challenged.

"Maybe, Vickland, but I notice it was my son who stayed around the longest," Garson said, smiling coldly at Tim. Tim felt the chill warmth of the smile and wanted to smile back. It was one of the few times when he had received some visible sign of approval from his father, but Garson had already turned back to the men. "We've got to chase the thing down before it attacks anyone."

"The Gork is gone," Tim said.

"Where?" his father demanded.

"I didn't see where he went," Tim said.

"You were in no danger," his father said sternly. "You should have stayed around and spotted where he hid."

"Oh, this is terrible," one of the women on the periphery of the crowd said. "That thing is hiding in the village?"

"We'll find it," Garson assured her, and he gave orders for the men to split into groups for the search. As he did so, he directed the village armorer to hand out one precious rifle with five cartridges to each group. "I want all of these back after we catch the Gork," Garson said. "I don't want any unauthorized use of ammunition for hunting. Our supply is too low."

"We can always raid one of the north villages," Vickland grumbled. Others nodded silent agreement.

"There'll be no more of that," Garson snapped. "I'll cut the grain allotment of the next man who suggests that. We've finally made our peace with the north villages and we're not going to break it."

Tim watched as the men, some of them grumbling,

others staring blackly at his father, broke into groups and started out on the search. His father was not popular, Tim realized, but that was because he was one of the few who seemed to be able to organize village effort. It was envy, he supposed, and some outright dislike. Still, they kept him as mayor and obeyed his orders, and that was what was important.

After a while only he and his father remained. The women drifted away, whispering fearfully among themselves. None of them, like Tim himself, had ever seen a Gork. Many of the older men claimed to have seen them in the days when the war was still raging across prairies and great man-made engines of destruction met the hovering deadly machines of the Goilel. Tim's father turned to him and said, "Go home with your mother, Tim."

"I want to stay and watch," Tim objected.

His father's face turned colder still and he said, "Timothy, obey me. Your mother needs you; she'll be frightened."

Tim nodded silently and walked down the village street toward their house, a silent anger burning in his throat.

Tim waited patiently through the afternoon. Occasionally he heard the shouts of the men as they searched. From the continuing turmoil, he knew that they had not found the Gork. He shuddered, thinking of the creature hiding somewhere near at hand, its appetite growing. True, Vickland had estimated that the Gork was probably as much as fifteen years old, quite aged for his species. Still, it represented a very present menace, perhaps as much psychological as physical, but a menace nevertheless.

His father returned, tired and sweaty from the day. He walked to the sink and pumped himself a cup of water. "We couldn't find the cursed thing," he said between gulps. "Hid somewhere . . . One of the dogs is missing, which means it has food . . . Tim, Stella, I don't want either of you venturing out of the house after dark."

"Oh, is it that bad?" Tim's mother asked.

"Huh, I'm not afraid," Tim said.

"You listen to me, young man," his father said. "When I give you an order, I expect it to be obeyed."

Tim lapsed into an angry silence that continued through dinner. When his father retired to the far corner of the common room to read by the mantel lamp, one of the few in the village, Tim's mother put her arm around his shoulders and whispered, "Don't be that way. He's very tired, and he has a lot of responsibility to carry."

"A lot he cares," Tim said, angrily.

"He cares a great deal," she contradicted in her low melodious voice. "He's not the type to show it but he cares."

Tim said nothing but the small core of anger still persisted in his vitals. As the family prepared for bed, he sat by the fireplace and whittled at the carving of a cow on which he had been working for a week. "Better get some sleep, boy," his father said as he and Tim's mother retired to their rooms. Tim spread out the pallet that served as his bed in front of the fire and tried to sleep, but a vague restlessness troubled him. He remembered the eyes of the Gork . . . they way they stared up at him with what seemed bewilderment. It was the size of the eyes without apparent pupils that gave that impression,

he thought. Still there was something pathetic amid the aura of menace, something pleading in the stance of the creature.

At this point, almost as though someone had inserted the idea into his head, he suddenly knew where the Gork was. The place was obvious, but none of the men had apparently thought to search it. He visualized the blind loft in the community barn and felt something resting there, looking out past the supposedly solid wall to him. Of course, they would not have searched the loft, which had been boarded off last year to seal the community's reserve supply of seed corn, a supply that must be guarded against petty pilfering. It would have been a simple matter for the Gork to climb to the narrow ledge before the loft, pry several of the rough timbers free, enter, and pull the timbers after it to give the appearance of the still solid wall.

Tim rose silently, pulled on his trousers, and thrust his bare feet into his scarred shoes. He wondered if he should wake his father, but his resentment against the man still persisted. He decided to investigate on his own.

The street outside was dark in spite of the full moon. Heavy clouds had blown across its face, blocking out most of the light. All of the houses along the street were dark. As he turned in to one of the lateral streets, the sound of heavy snoring drifted out from one of the open windows.

The barn was near the end of the street amid the animal pens, now all vacant. The cows were pastured in the north at the moment and the few pigs remaining in the village were quartered near individual houses. He walked through the empty barnyard, past the concrete watering trough, and pushed aside the sagging door.

Inside the smell of damp hay filled his nostrils. The moon broke through the clouds at this point and a beam of moonlight arrowed down from an open loft door, illuminating the interior of the barn.

He found a rude ladder leaning against the back wall and carried it forward past plows and other tools to the overhang that marked the sealed loft. As soon as he had tested the solidity of the ladder, he climbed to the narrow ledge before the loft. Throughout this the sense of another presence grew stronger. He was surprised to find that he was not at all frightened. A mood of quiet expectancy settled over him.

He inched out on the narrow ledge and looked the length of the loft wall. Sure enough, he saw that several of the rough-hewn timbers protruded just a bit, not more than a quarter of an inch, but that was enough to tell him that they were loose. He inched closer and pushed the timbers aside. Beyond them the expansive loft was dark and dusty.

He paused, waiting for a sound. Then he wiggled through the opening and stood, waiting for eyes to adjust to the gloom. Some light filtered in from gaps in the side timbers of the loft. After a moment the details of the loft became clear. It stretched half the length of the barn, a low slant-ceilinged room of some thirty feet in length by fifteen feet in width. The back half of the loft was piled high with bags of seed grain while the rough floor in the foreground still held patches of hay with occasional yellow glints of corn, carelessly spilled. Tim became conscious of the acrid stench in the air.

The Gork lay, propped up against a pile of seed bags, its great eyes open and staring, its tiny mouth cupped and working. Tim heard the soft hiss of air rushing in

and out of its thoracic vents. Across the outstretched legs of the Gork the quiet form of one of the dogs lay. Tim gasped, remembering the feeding habits of the Gork.

At that moment the dog raised its head, moaned softly, and wagged its tail. The Gork made a high whistling sound through its vents. Tim was startled to hear a hissing approximation of speech.

"You see," the Gork said in its thin eerie voice, "it was injured but I have not harmed it."

"You crippled it," Tom accused.

"No," the Gork said thinly and, Tim thought, tiredly. "No, it fell on one of the machines below as it was attacking me." Tim realized that the Gork must be referring to one of the plows stored below with its sharp forged-steel blade.

"I *know* what you do," Tim accused. "You've been feeding on its blood."

The Gork seemed to shake itself. It raised an arm weakly and then dropped it. "No," it said. "It is true that I need food but to feed would mean the end of the creature's life. Call the men now and they will kill me."

"Is that what you want?" Tim demanded.

"If they will let me say something. If you will listen to me, then it does not matter."

The Gork's hand touched the dog almost gently and to Tim's surprise the wounded beast raised its head and licked tentatively at the alien limb. The stench of the Gork's ichor filled the loft but the dog seemed completely unaware of it.

Tim stood in indecision. "I'll take the dog," he said at last.

"No," the Gork said. "No, your people kill wounded animals."

"What do your people do?" Tim challenged.

The Gork said nothing. Its hand fell back for a moment in fatigue. Finally it raised its head and stared sorrowfully at Tim. "Will you call the men?" it asked.

"I don't know," Tim said. The surprise at finding the Gork intelligent and not at all the menacing thing he had been taught troubled him. The odor of the alien was sickening but its gentleness disturbed him.

"Can you get some food and water for the beast?" the Gork asked. "It can heal here if it's not disturbed."

Tim nodded silently and hurried to the hole. In the last minute he looked back. What am I doing? he thought, but suddenly it seemed the only sensible thing.

He made his way down the ladder and out into the street. At his house, he found some meat scraps and a bowl of water. Ten minutes later he was back, climbing the ladder with one hand, the package of scraps tucked into his waistband, the bowl held precariously by the other hand.

The Gork was weaker. Its eyes seemed filmed in the half dark but they still reflected an iridiscent purple. The dog had crawled to one side. It nosed feebly at the scraps Tim had brought and finally drank from the bowl.

"You're not what I expected," Tim told the Gork.

"You are different too," the Gork said. "We have always thought you savages."

"Savages?" Tim said angrily. "It was you who invaded us and attacked us, you and your masters."

"Masters?" the Gork said. "We have no masters."

"The Goilel," Tim said.

The Gork sighed in a whistling, very human fashion. Then it began to emit an eerie cut-cut-cut sound.

"What's wrong?" Tim demanded.

"I was—what is your word?—laughing, I think."

"Is what I said so funny?" Tim demanded angrily.

"In a way," the Gork said. "The Goilel are not masters; they are children, our children."

"That's stupid," Tim said. "They attacked men when they landed. Do children do that?"

"Is that what you're told?" the Gork asked. It made the bitter cut-cut-cut sound again. Tim turned to go. "Are you going to call the men now?"

"No," Tim said wonderingly. "No, not now."

"Will you come again?"

"Tomorrow night," Tim promised. Then he paused at the hole. "How did you learn to speak English?" he asked at last.

"I did not learn," the whistling voice said. "I speak as I have always spoken."

Tim pondered the problem as he climbed down the ladder. He remembered the distant feel of a mind probing, the odd intuition that told him the Gork was in the loft. The explanation came to him. For long moments he rejected it and he realized that in some fashion they were communicating *without* words.

He slept badly that night, waking in his excitement over the secret knowledge. He did not know yet what he would do about the Gork, but he was sure now that he would not tell the men. He thought of telling his father, but the image of that stern, uncaring face appeared in his mind's eye and he knew that he would not.

He spent the day at the silo again, helping the men bale new hay that came in on ricks from the field.

Finally supper came and with it dusk. As soon as his father and mother were asleep, he slipped out of the house and hurried to the loft. The Gork stench still filled the room but it had abated somewhat. The Gork was obviously weaker.

"It is good to see you," the Gork said and Tim felt a wave of emotion sweep over him. Part of it was of his own doing, he realized, a kind of pity in spite of himself. He came over and crouched beside the alien, ignoring the smell.

"Are you better?" he asked.

"Weak," the alien said.

"Are you hurt?"

"Hurt," the alien agreed, "but wounds will heal. I lose strength."

"What do you need?" Tim asked.

The Gork shook its head in a very human gesture. It ignored his question and said, "I came to talk with men. It is the last chance to talk."

"What about?" Tim demanded.

"There is much you need to know about us," the Gork said. The words seemed to fade to impressions, a wave of emotion, and, as Tim sank to his haunches before the Gork, vague traceries of visions.

He saw alien landscapes in his mind and when he closed his eyes they became clearer. It was a gentle lovely world with a high level of technology that allowed the Goilel and the Gork to live in an almost sylvan environment. They controlled climate and weather and made plants bloom and grow in unknown tailored shapes. The sun was a great sphere with a blue tint that warmed the land and the people.

The Gork, Tim saw, were the elders, governing the

land and working for their young. He saw the Goilel emerging from eggs and growing tall and strong while the Gork hovered near them, proud of their strong offspring. As the Goilel advanced in age, they folded themselves into a sort of cocoon very much like earth butterflies and in due course the Gork emerged. The Goilel were male and female and mated to lay eggs. The Gork adults were sexless and their lives were devoted to thought and to the service of the complex society that nurtured them and the Goilel.

It was a strange and alien sight to Tim. He saw their animals raised in quiet fields. He realized that they did not slaughter animals as men did. The animals were very much mammalian and the race fed upon their blood. To do this, they did not kill the animals but carefully cared for them with a gentleness that men had never shown to their cattle. Above all was the single impression that the Goilel or the Gork did not kill except in self-defense. Anything else was completely abhorrent to their nature.

When it was over, Tim fell back, breathing heavily. He was terribly frightened and over this was a sense of loss, of terrible regret. Were these the people that he had been taught to hate, that men said had attacked them and destroyed men's society?

"We did destroy," the Gork said tiredly. "We offered peace and were attacked. We were the last; we had to fight back, even if it meant our own near-destruction as it did."

"Oh, no," Tim said softly. He felt suddenly near to tears. The terrible waste of it.

"You must tell them," he said.

"Will they listen?" the Gork asked. "We are dying

without food animals. We must make peace before too late."

"I'll find a way," Tim promised.

"It must be soon," the Gork said weakly.

"What can I do?" Tim asked anxiously.

"I dare not ask it," the Gork said.

Tim saw in his mind what it meant. He fell back in horror. The thought came to him: a gentle apology.

"Is that the only way?" Tim asked.

"I'm sorry," the Gork said.

"Very well," Tim said after a long silence. I am a man, he thought, and men owed them much.

"Very well," he said again and fearfully offered his arm.

* * *

He tried to talk to his father the next morning over breakfast. "Dad," he said, "I can't believe the Gorks are the monsters I've heard."

His father said nothing. "I mean," he said, "do we really know that much about them? The war was a long time ago and we never actually had contact with them."

His father looked at him, a vague frown creasing his head. "I only know what I've been told, just like you," he said at last. "Why this sudden change of heart?"

"It just seems that an intelligent people who can build spaceships and that sort of thing, they wouldn't be savages."

"They attacked us," his father said.

"Are you sure? You know how men are. Are you sure?"

"I think we've about exhausted the subject," his fa-

ther said. "The Goilel and the Gork are completely alien and the enemies of men."

"But—"

"That ends it," his father said and returned to his breakfast.

That evening he told the Gork. "It is much as I suspected it would be," the Gork said.

The two sat for a long time in silent communion. There was a special aura about the Gork, Tim found. More and more they seemed to be able to communicate without the clumsy necessity of words. The gentleness of the being's thoughts, his obvious regard for Tim—all of these were emotions Tim had not previously experienced. Try as he would to get close to his father, he had never felt the sense of communion with that man that he now felt with the Gork.

When it came time to go, he stood up and the Gork asked sadly, "Will you try again?"

"Yes," Tim said. "I'll try. Perhaps I can get through to him." He looked down at the alien, seeing the sorrow in the saucer eyes. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"No," the Gork said.

"You know you can't hide your thoughts from me," Tim said, "not now."

He offered his arm, feeling a strange emotion.

* * *

The dog died the next day in spite of the Gork's care. That night Tim carried its body down to the floor of the barn, intending to bury it later. Then he returned and they talked for an hour. Talk really was not the word for it. Human words were too limiting to describe what

went between them. The Gork projected a feeling of respect and concern. They did not wish to fight, nor did they wish to die. It would be so easy. With most of their knowledge still intact, they could bring back the shattered technology of men, show them new avenues of life, not the sort of life that had led men to despoil the planet before the coming of the aliens, but a new and better way of living with the earth and its riches. The only thing they wanted in return was new food animals, a chance to settle in some barren place and to save their race. They did not breed rapidly and they would be no menace to men. It was a simple and logical partnership.

"I understand," Tim said. "I wish I could make them understand."

He left the loft feeling troubled and walked back slowly to his house. He did not think of the dog until the next morning, when Vickland appeared at their house as breakfast ended.

"Mayor, Mayor," the man said excitedly. "We've found the dog."

"Where?" Tim's father demanded, abandoning his breakfast.

"'In the barn," Vickland said. "Jim and I found it. You know what that means?"

"It means the beast is still around," Garson said.

"That's right. He's somewhere in the area."

"Of course," Garson said, the knowledge growing in his eyes. "Of course, the sealed loft."

"Blazes," Vickland exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that? Jim's still back there."

He started for the door but Garson snapped, "Wait until I get a gun." He walked to a cabinet near the fireplace, unlocked it, and produced a rifle.

"Dad," Tim said. "Dad, I've got to talk with you."

"Later, son," Garson said. He and Vickland hurried out the door. Tim ran after them but both men were moving at a trot. He trailed them for some minutes. Finally, he drew abreast of his father just as they reached the barn. Vickland yelled out "Jim," and the barn door opened. A lean middle-aged man came out. Vickland yelled, "That damned thing is in the loft. Get the men and the dogs." Jim took off at a run.

"Stay out there," Garson ordered Vickland and pushed open the sagging door. Vickland stood in indecision. Tim pushed past him and followed his father into the barn. He found him standing beside the dog's still form.

"Dad, I've got to talk to you," Tim insisted.

His father pumped a round into the rifle chamber and said angrily, "Boy, get out of here."

"No," Tim said. "No, I won't."

Garson turned on him and demanded, "What's got into you? I'm ordering you out for your own good."

"I won't go," Tim shouted and tears began to course down his face. He hadn't realized how close he was to tears, but now he began to cry. He hadn't cried in years, but the fear of what was about to happen seized him. He shouted, "You're not going to kill him. I won't let you."

His father looked wonderingly at him. "Tim, what's got into you, son?" he asked gently.

"Oh, Dad," Tim said. In an instant all of the story was spilling from his lips. He told of finding the Gork and all that had happened thereafter. "Don't you see?" he pleaded. "They're not monsters. They're fine and decent and they just want to live."

"How can I believe you?" his father asked.

"Come with me," Tim said and started to climb the ladder. After a moment of indecision, his father followed him. They pushed aside the timbers and entered the loft. The Gork lay on the far side of the loft, silent and alert.

"Tell him," Tim said excitedly. "Tell him all you've told me."

"You are the boy's father?" the Gork asked.

Tim's father looked bewildered, uncertain. Finally he said, "You can talk."

"Yes," the Gork said. "In a way."

"Is this all true, what the boy said?"

"It is true," the Gork said. "I know it is hard to believe, but it is all true. We've tried to talk with men before."

"I can't believe it," Tim's father said.

"If we were monsters," the Gork said, "you would not have a son now."

Tim's father fell silent, his brow creased in thought.

"Let him show you, talk with you," Tim pleaded.

His father shivered. "I can't do that."

"It's true," Tim said. "They just want some food animals. They won't hurt them."

"So you say," Tim's father said. Tim bared his arm to show the ring of stippling above the vein.

"He didn't harm me," Tim said. "I've kept him alive and he didn't harm me."

"Oh, God," Tim's father said, looking sick. Tim spoke excitedly and earnestly. Gradually he saw uncertainty enter his father's eyes.

"All right," Garson said at last. "I'll keep the men from harming you. You're our prisoner, however. We'll have a long time to talk before I'm satisfied."

"Thank you," the Gork said simply.

They climbed down to the barn floor and Tim said, "Please, Dad, help him."

"I'll try," Tim's father said. "He can't harm us, obviously. We have to take the chance."

Outside the men had gathered, their eyes fearful. "Go home," Garson told them. "Everything's under control."

"Is the Gork dead?" Vickland demanded.

"No," Garson said.

"Then we'll kill it," Vickland said, running forward with a rifle.

Garson blocked Vickland's path. "I give the orders around here," he snapped.

"That thing's got to be killed," Vickland shouted. Garson hit him then, sending the man sprawling on the ground.

"Anybody else?" he demanded. The men muttered. "Get along now," Garson ordered. The men began to drift away. The last to go was Vickland, rubbing his jaw. At last they were alone.

"I hope you're right, boy," Garson said tiredly.

"I'm right," Tim told him. They entered the barn.

Garson stood, looking up at the loft. "If it's true," he said, "it means a great deal for all of us." He frowned and turned to Tim. "You gave him blood to keep him alive?"

"That's right," Tim said.

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"How could you? What did he do for you that you would do this for him?"

"He gave me something," Tim said slowly, a quiet knowledge growing in him.

"What?" Tim's father demanded. "What could he possibly give you?"

Tim thought. Finally he said simply, "Love."

"Oh, boy," his father said sadly. He placed his arm around Tim. Tim looked up at his father and for the first time saw the man's emotion spilling from his eyes.

Tim hugged his father. The Gork, he realized now, had given him two things, two very precious and rare gifts.

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