

THE
JOHN
VARLEY
READER

Thirty Years of Short Fiction

JOHN VARLEY



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION TO *The John Varley Reader*

On January 20, 2002, at 2:30 in the afternoon, a fire broke out in the big, abandoned fruit and vegetable market and warehouse covering the two blocks between SE 10th and 11th, Belmont and Taylor, in Portland, Oregon. By the time the fire department arrived there was little they could do but try to keep the fire from spreading to adjacent buildings. In less than half an hour a fourth alarm was called in. At peak, 125 firefighters were involved. Eventually the fire reached the north end of the warehouse, which abutted the building that used to contain the Monte Carlo restaurant, where Lee and I spent some pleasant years in one of the two great old apartments above.

It is very strange to look at the gutted remains of a place you used to call home.

Only the edges of the tiled roof survived. Some of the huge old attic beams still stood, though the fire had eaten deeply. In back, the roof and the attic floor had fallen and taken the walls and floors of our bedroom and offices with them. A tiny portion of the south wall of Lee's office was visible, one of the walls with the decorative sponge painting job she had been so proud of.

Taking the good with the bad, the Monte Carlo was a pretty cool place to live. On a coolness scale of 1 to 10, with Leavenworth Prison being a 1, San Simeon a 10, and Travis McGee's "Busted Flush" houseboat a 9, the Monte Carlo was an 8.

The apartment looked out on downtown Portland from across the river. On the fourth of July, Cinco de Mayo, and half a dozen festivals each year we could watch the fireworks from our windows. The restaurant itself was a hangout for half the elderly Italian population of Portland. Lots of guys who looked like Don Corleone showed up most days. They made the best minestrone in town. While we were there it became the hot nightspot for Reed College students, doing some disco revival thing, then went back to its old slumber again as fashion moved on to a new spot.

We knew it was a firetrap. Only one stairway, made of old dry wood. It was the only place I ever lived that was plumbed for beverages. Flexible plastic tubes led from pressurized bottles in the basement, up our stairs, and through a wall into the bar below. I figured if a fire got started I'd cut the pipe and drown the blaze with 7-Up or Coke. I'd have to be careful not to confuse it with the other pipes, which were full of vodka, Scotch, and gin. I thought of splicing into one, like stealing cab service, but decided it wasn't worth it for bar whiskey.

Many people go through their entire lives without ever living in an 8, and I've lived in three. The first was 1354 Haight Street, San Francisco, a block and a half from the Center of the Universe. You could almost see the Haight & Ashbury sign from there. Across the street was a head shop, the floor above was a notorious crank house where we once saw Janis Joplin going in to score, and down at the corner was Magnolia Thunderpussy, probably the coolest ice cream parlor in America. I feel very lucky to have lived there for a year, and to have survived, as we were all experimenting with various drugs at the time.

I've been lucky about many things.

This year, 2004, marks the thirtieth anniversary of my first publication of a science fiction story. The strikes me as a pretty good time for a retrospective. Such a thing ought to have an introduction.

I didn't always feel that way. When I started out as a writer, I was very uncomfortable with

interviews, radio, and television. In fact, I still hate to do self-promotion. I felt the stories ought to speak for themselves. So my first story collection, *The Persistence of Vision*, had a very flattering introduction by Algis Budrys, because my publisher insisted on it, and the next two, *The Barb* Murders and *Blue Champagne*, had nothing at all; just a table of contents and the stories.

I'm not saying I'm an exceptionally private person. I've gone to conventions, sat on panels discussing my works and science fiction in general. My phone number has always been a listed one and I've only regretted that once. And I've recently gone public in a big way, for me, by opening a website where I post my thoughts (what they call blogs these days) and odd items I write that I don't feel are likely to sell.

But re-reading these stories, thinking about them and about the recent fire and the transience of things and of life itself, realizing that since I don't build things, haven't founded any corporations, and am not likely to revolutionize science with a stunning new discovery anytime soon, my most important legacy will be these stories. And while I still believe they must stand on their own with no explanations from me, that they must speak for themselves . . . it strikes me that telling a little about where I was, what I was doing, and who I was when I wrote them might be of interest to readers.

It is probably as close to an autobiography as I will ever get. I don't propose to write one here, and I don't intend to put it all up front in one indigestible lump, either. Instead, I will scatter it through the book in introductions to the individual stories. If you aren't interested in stuff like that, feel free to skip to the stories themselves, which is what this volume is all about, anyway. But if you do enjoy the introductions you are invited to join me at www.varley.net for lots more.

INTRODUCTION TO “*Picnic on Nearside*”

The Monte Carlo fire was not the first time a place I had recently lived in burned. 1735 Waller Street in San Francisco was a 6 on the cool-places-to-live scale. Maybe a 6.5. It would have scored higher because the location was great—half a block away from Golden Gate Park, one block from Haight Street—but this was the early seventies, and the Haight-Ashbury had come down a bit since the “golden age” of the hippies. In fact, the streets were littered with the wreckage of those people whose experiments in mind expansion had not stopped with marijuana and LSD, but had moved on to the joys of crank and heroin. Many of the storefronts were empty, and most of the old Victorian houses were firetraps.

Go back there now and you will see that gentrification has hit the neighborhood like a gold-plated hammer. Everything has been rehabilitated and repainted and the people living there are urban professionals. They are the only ones who can afford it. I doubt that I could rent a closet at 1735 for the \$175/month that I used to pay for the whole four-bedroom second-floor flat. There’s a McDonald’s on the corner of Haight and Stanyan. The old Straight Theater is gone, replaced by an upscale Goodwill store. Most of the rest of the businesses deal in antiques.

I have to confess I liked it better in the seventies, even though I might have died there.

There was an ex-Jehovah’s Witness named Teardrop who lived in a room below us. He was one of the sweetest guys I’ve ever met, but he had one bad habit: he smoked in bed. That would have been dangerous enough, but he was also epileptic. One night he had a seizure, and in minutes his room was an inferno. I stumbled downstairs with my family in a torrent of smoke, virtually blind.

The SFFD is very quick; they arrived while I was still coughing, and had the fire out before much damage was done. We were all safe, Teardrop didn’t even have a minor burn, but I was always nervous about the place after that.

With good reason. One month after we moved to Eugene, Oregon, fire gutted the place. It was empty for years, but has now been restored.

It was while living in this flat that I first got the idea that I might try to write and sell science fiction stories. The reason was simple. I needed the money.

I had left southeast Texas on a National Merit Scholarship to Michigan State, mostly because on the list of schools which had accepted me and whose tuition and room and board the scholarship would cover, MSU was the most distant from Texas. I began as a physics major, then saw how hard and how little fun that was going to be, switched to English, found that to be rather dry, and hit the road in the footsteps of Jack Kerouac. I thought of myself as a beatnik until I got to the Haight during the Summer of Love, where I first heard the word hippie.

Within a few hours of our arrival my traveling companion, Chris, and I found ourselves in San Francisco sitting on the floor of an empty storefront on Stanyan Street with a few dozen others, a place run by people called The Diggers, feasting on free chicken necks and chanting some Hindu mantra with Allen Ginsberg playing a hand organ about the size of Schroeder’s piano.

So just what do hippies do? we wanted to know. Write angry poetry? Sit around coffee shops? Plot to overthrow the government with force and violence? Well, no, mostly we sing and dance to groups like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Big Brother and the Holding Company (while sneering

at groups from Los Angeles and New York), smoke or ingest various psychedelic substances, and just generally groove on life. ~~Oh, yeah, and we are in favor of peace and free love, which means we screw a lot.~~

Your basic sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

Works for me.

We had been squeaking by for years on nothing much. I think it may have been easier in those days than it is today to exist with no visible means of support. There was a feeling of community, even in the drug-ravaged streets of the Haight. We never even considered illegal activities, never stole anything, never dealt in drugs. We never had to. If people had stuff, they shared.

That's not to say it was easy. Standing in line at St. Anthony's Mission downtown for their daily (and surprisingly good) free lunch was fun. Standing outside the Lucky market on Stanyan Street panhandling got old quickly. In fact, after about five years on the roads between LA and New York and San Francisco and Berkeley, dodging the draft board all the way, it was all starting to get old.

In all my meanderings I had never held an actual job for more than a few weeks. I washed dishes, worked in a warehouse wrapping packages. I lasted for three days as a "flyboy" at the end of a printing press, gathering up advertising circulars still wet with ink in stacks of fifty, always falling behind as the press spit out paper faster than I could pick it up, until I realized one night I was becoming part of the machine, and the least efficient part of it, at that. I bused tables (and to this day I will not bus my own table at fast-food places). That was about the extent of my labor skills. That still about the extent of my skills.

So what did I have that people would pay money for? A handful of credits toward a B.A. in English, one creative writing class which I seldom attended after I heard the lame assignments the teacher was giving out, and an extensive background in science fiction. Reading it, not writing it.

I'd been doing it since Mr. Green, the librarian at my junior high school, handed me a copy of *Red Planet*, by Robert A. Heinlein, and said I might enjoy it, very much as a street-corner dealer in heroin will give you a free sample.

Could I write this stuff? Could I write it well? Would people pay me for it? I didn't know the answers to any of these questions, but with the optimism of youth I decided it couldn't hurt anything to try, between stints of bumming spare change. What's the worst that could happen? Rejection slips. Believe me, standing outside the Lucky market you quickly get a very thick skin when it comes to rejection.

I sat down at a little desk at 1735 Waller Street and started to write a novel.

I wrote it in ballpoint pen, on ruled notebook paper, just like I had in high school. It was called *Giant*, and it was pretty bad. (I still like the title; maybe I'll use it someday.) I taught myself to type—badly, I still look at the keyboard—on an electric Smith-Corona that I bought for \$5 at a thrift store. Then I sent the novel out and started collecting the well-deserved rejection slips. It began to seem that Hugo and Nebula awards for this book were just an idle dream, not to mention the New York Times bestseller list and that screenwriting Oscar.

But I didn't give up. To stay busy I wrote the following short story, "Picnic on Nearside." Actually it was a novelette, but I didn't even know that term at the time. It was 12,563 words long . . . by actual count. (I later learned that you could count three representative pages and average them. Who knew?)

I sent it out to Ed Ferman at The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, and a few months later got back a nice letter. Mr. Ferman said he liked the story a lot, but he'd like it a lot better if it was 10,000 words. I spent all of five minutes raging about idiot editors, then sat down and started crossing stuff out. I declared war on modifiers, clauses, sentences, entire paragraphs that had snuck in there when I wasn't looking. I got it down to pretty much exactly 10,000 words . . . and discovered that I had accidentally improved the story tremendously. I sent it back, and a few months later got a check for \$200.

That was a whole month's rent, with \$25 left over to buy records!

I decided this was the life for me.

PICNIC ON NEARSIDE

THIS IS THE story of how I went to the Nearside and found old Lester and maybe grew up a little. And about time, too, as Carnival would say. Carnival is my mother. We don't get along well most of the time, and I think it's because I'm twelve and she's ninety-six. She says it makes no difference, and she waited so long to have her child because she wanted to be sure she was ready for it. And I answer back that at her age she's too far away from childhood to remember what it's like. And she replies that her memory is perfect all the way back to her birth. And I retort . . .

We argue a lot.

I'm a good debater, but Carnival's a special problem. She's an Emotionalist; so anytime I try to bring facts into the argument she waves it away with a statement like, "Facts only get in the way of my preconceived notions." I tell her that's irrational, and she says I'm perfectly right, and she means to be. Most of the time we can't even agree on premises to base a disagreement on. You'd think that would be the death of debate, but if you did, you don't know Carnival and me.

The major topic of debate around our warren for seven or eight lunations had been the Change we wanted to get. The battle lines had been drawn, and we had been at it every day. She thought a Change would harm my mind at my age. *Everybody* was getting one.

We were all sitting at the breakfast table. There was me and Carnival, and Chord, the man Carnival has lived with for several years, and Adagio, Chord's daughter. Adagio is seven.

There had been a big battle the night before between me and Carnival. It had ended up (more or less) with me promising to divorce her as soon as I was of age. I don't remember what the counterthreat was. I had been pretty upset.

I was sitting there eating fitfully and licking my wounds. The argument had been inconclusive philosophically, but from the pragmatic standpoint she had won, no question about it. The hard fact was that I couldn't get a Change until she affixed her personality index to the bottom of a sheet of input, and she said she'd put her brain in cold storage before she'd allow that. She would, too.

"I think I'm ready to have a Change," Carnival said to us.

"That's not fair!" I yelled. "You said that just to spite me. You just want to rub it in that I'm nothing and you're anything you want to be."

"We'll have no more of that," she said, sharply. "We've exhausted this subject, and I will not change my mind. You're too young for a Change."

"Blowout," I said. "I'll be an adult soon; it's only a year away. Do you really think I'll be all that different in a year?"

"I don't care to predict that. I hope you'll mature. But if, as you say, it's only a year, why are you in such a hurry?"

"And I wish you wouldn't use language like that," Chord said.

Carnival gave him a sour look. She has a hard line about outside interference when she's trying to cope with me. She doesn't want anyone butting in. But she wouldn't say anything in front of me and Adagio.

"I think you should let Fox get his Change," Adagio said, and grinned at me. Adagio is a good kid

as younger foster-siblings go. I could always count on her to back me up, and I returned the favor when I could.

“You keep out of this,” Chord advised her, then to Carnival, “Maybe we should leave the table until you and Fox get this settled.”

“You’d have to stay away for a year,” Carnival said. “Stick around. The discussion is over. If Fox thinks different, he can go to his room.”

That was my cue, and I got up and ran from the table. I felt silly doing it, but the tears were real. It was just that there’s a part of me that stays cool enough to try and get the best of any situation.

Carnival came to see me a little later, but I did my best to make her feel unwelcome. I can be good at that, at least with her. She left when it became obvious she couldn’t make anything any better. She was hurt, and when the door closed, I felt really miserable, mad at her and at myself, too. I was finding it hard to love her as much as I had a few years before, and feeling ashamed because I couldn’t.

I worried over that for a while and decided I should apologize. I left my room and was ready to go and cry in her arms, but it didn’t happen that way. Maybe if it had, things would have been different and Halo and I would never have gone to Nearside.

Carnival and Chord were getting ready to go out. They said they’d be gone most of the lune. They were dressing up for it, and what bothered me and made me change my plans was that they were dressing in the family room instead of in their own private rooms where I thought they should.

She had taken off her feet and replaced them with peds, which struck me as foolish, since peds don’t make sense in free-fall. But Carnival wears them every chance she gets, prancing around like a high-stepping horse because they are so unsuited to walking. I think people look silly with hands on the ends of their legs. And naturally she had left her feet lying on the floor.

Carnival glanced at her watch and said something about how they would be late for the shuttle. As they left, she glanced over her shoulder.

“Fox, would you do me a favor and put those feet away, please? Thanks.” Then she was gone.

An hour later, in the depths of my depression, the door rang. It was a woman I had never seen before. She was nude.

You know how sometimes you can look at someone you know who’s just had a Change and not recognize them instantly, even though they might be twenty centimeters shorter or taller and maybe fifty kilos more or less and look nothing at all like the person you knew? Maybe you don’t, because not everyone has this talent, but I have it very strong. Carnival says it’s an evolutionary change in the race, a response to the need to recognize other individuals who can change their appearance at will. That may be true; she can’t do it at all.

I think it’s something to do with the way a person wears a body: any body, of either sex. Little mannerisms like blinking, mouth movements, stance, fingers; maybe even the total kinesthetic gesture the doctors talk about. This was like that. I could see behind the pretty female face and the different height and weight and recognize someone I knew. It was Halo, my best friend, who had been a man the last time I saw him, three lunes ago. She had a big foolish grin on her face.

“Hi, Fox,” she said, in a voice that was an octave higher and yet was unmistakably Halo’s. “Guess who?”

“Queen Victoria, right?” I tried to sound bored. “Come on in, Halo.”

Her face fell. She came in, looking confused.

“What do you think?” she said, turning slowly to give me a look from all sides. All of them were good because—as if I needed anything else—her mother had let her get the full treatment: fully developed breasts, all the mature curves—the works. She had been denied only the adult height. She was even a few centimeters shorter than she had been.

“It’s fine,” I said.

“Listen, Fox, if you’d rather I left . . .”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Halo,” I said, giving up on my hatred. “You look great. Fabulous. Really you do. I’m just having a hard time being happy for you. Carnival is never going to give in.”

She was instantly sympathetic. She took my hand, startling me badly.

“I was so happy I guess I was tactless,” she said in a low voice. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come over here yet.”

She looked at me with big brown eyes (they had been blue, usually), and I started realizing what this was going to mean to me. I mean, Halo? A female? Halo, the guy I used to run the corridors with? The guy who helped me build that awful eight-legged cat that Carnival wouldn’t let in the house and who looked like a confused caterpillar? Who made love to the same girls I did and compared notes with me later when we were alone and helped me out when the gang tried to beat me up and cried with me and vowed to get even? Could we do any of that now? I didn’t know. Most of my best friends were male, maybe because the sex thing tended to make matters too complicated with females, and I couldn’t handle both things with the same person yet.

But Halo was having no such doubts. In fact, she was standing very close to me and practicing that wide-eyed innocent look that she knew did funny things to me. She knew it because I had told her so many times back when she was a boy. Somehow that didn’t seem fair.

“Ah, listen, Halo,” I said hastily, backing away. She had been going for my pants! “Ah, I think I’ll need some time to get used to this. How can I . . . ? You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” She didn’t think she did, and neither did I, really. All I knew was I was unaccountably mortified at what she was so anxious to try. And she was still coming at me.

“Say!” I said, desperately. “Say! I have an idea! Ah . . . I know. Let’s take Carnival’s jumper and go for a ride, okay? She said I could use it today.” My mouth was leading its own life, out of control. Everything I said was extemporaneous, as much news to me as it was to her.

She stopped pursuing me. “Did she really?”

“Sure,” I said, very assured. This was only a half lie, by my mother’s lights. What had happened was I had meant to ask her for the jumper, and I was sure she would have said yes. I was logical. I was certain she would have. I had just forgotten to ask, that’s all. So it was almost as if permission had been granted, and I went on as if it had. The reasoning behind this is tricky, I admit, but as I said, Carnival would have understood.

“Well,” Halo said, not really overjoyed at the idea, “where would we go?”

“How about to Old Archimedes?” Again, that was a big surprise to me. I had had no idea I wanted to go there.

Halo was really shocked. I jolted her right out of her new mannerisms. She reacted just like the other girls Halo would have, with a dopey face and open mouth. Then she tried on other reactions: covering her

mouth with her hands and wilting a little. First-time Changers are like that; new women tend to mope around like something out of a gothic novel, and new men swagger and grunt like Marlon Brando in *Streetcar Named Desire*. They get over it.

Halo got over it right in front of my eyes. She stared at me, scratching her head.

“Are you crazy? Old Archimedes is on the Nearside. They don’t let anybody go over there.”

“Don’t they?” I asked, suddenly interested. “Do you know that for a fact? And if so, why not?”

“Well, I mean everybody knows . . .”

“Do they? Who is ‘they’ that won’t let us go?”

“The Central Computer, I guess.”

“Well, the only way to find out is to try it. Come on, let’s go.” I grabbed her arm. I could see she was confused, and I wanted it to remain that way until I could get my own thoughts together.

“I’d like a flight plan to Old Archimedes on the Nearside,” I said, trying to sound as grownup and unworried as possible. We had packed a lunch and reached the field in ten minutes, due largely to my frantic prodding.

“That’s a little imprecise, Fox,” said the CC. “Old Archimedes is a big place. Would you like to try again?”

“Ah . . .” I drew a blank. Damn all computers and their literal-mindedness! What did I know about Old Archimedes? About as much as I knew about Old New York or Old Bombay.

“Give me a flight plan to the main landing field.”

“That’s better. The data are . . .” It reeled off the string of numbers. I fed them into the pilot and tried to relax.

“Here goes,” I said to Halo. “This is Fox-Carnival-Joule, piloting private jumper AX1453, based King City. I hereby file a flight plan to Old Archimedes’ main landing field, described as follows . . . I repeated the numbers the CC had given me. “Filed on the seventeenth lune of the fourth lunation the year 214 of the Occupation of Earth. I request an initiation time.”

“Granted. Time as follows: thirty seconds from mark. Mark.”

I was stunned. “That’s all there is to it?”

It chuckled. Damn maternalistic machine. “What did you expect, Fox? Marshals converging on your jumper?”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought you wouldn’t allow us to go to the Nearside.”

“A popular misconception. You are a free citizen, although a minor, and able to go where you wish on the lunar surface. You are subject only to the laws of the state and the specific wishes of your parent as programmed into me. I . . . Do you wish me to start the burn for you?”

“Mind your own business.” I watched the tick and pressed the button when it reached zero. The acceleration was mild, but went on for a long time. Hell, Old Archimedes is at the antipodes.

“I have the responsibility to see that you do not endanger yourself through youthful ignorance or forgetfulness. I must also see that you obey the wishes of your mother. Other than that, you are on your own.”

“You mean Carnival gave me permission to go to the Nearside?”

“I didn’t say that. I have received no instruction from Carnival *not* to permit you to go to Nearside. There are no unusual dangers to your safety on Nearside. So I had no choice but to approve your flight plan.” It paused, significantly. “It is my experience that few parents consider it necessary to instruct me to deny such permission. I infer that it’s because so few people ever ask to go there. I also note that your parent is at the present moment unreachable; she has left instructions not to be disturbed. Fox,” the CC said, accusingly, “it occurs to me that this is no accident. Did you have this planned?”

I *hadn’t!* But if I’d known . . .

“No.”

“I suppose you want a return flight plan?”

“Why? I’ll ask you when I’m ready to come back.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” it said, smugly. “In another five minutes you’ll be out of range of my last receptor. I don’t extend to the Nearside, you know. Haven’t in decades. You’re going out of contact, Fox. You’ll be on your own. Think about it.”

I did. For a queasy moment I wanted to turn back. Without the CC to monitor us, kids wouldn’t be allowed on the surface for *years*.

Was I that confident? I know how hostile the surface is if it ever gets the drop on you. I thought I had all the mistakes trained out of me by now, but did I?

“How exciting,” Halo gushed. She was off in the clouds again, completely over her shock at where we were going. She was bubble-headed like that for three lunes after her Change. Well, so was I, later when I had my first.

“Hush, numbskull,” I said, not unkindly. Nor was she insulted. She just grinned at me and gawked out the window as we approached the terminator.

I checked the supply of consumables; they were in perfect shape for a stay of a full lunation if needed, though I had larked off without a glance at the delta-vee.

“All right, smart-ass, give me the data for the return.”

“Incomplete request,” the CC drawled.

“Damn you, I want a flight plan Old Archimedes-King City, and no back talk.”

“Noted. Assimilated.” It gave me that data. Its voice was getting fainter.

“I don’t suppose,” it said, diffidently, “that you’d care to give me an indication of when you plan to return?”

Ha! I had it where it hurt. Carnival wouldn’t be happy with the CC’s explanation, I was sure of that.

“Tell her I’ve decided to start my own colony and I’ll never come back.”

“As you wish.”

Old Archimedes was bigger than I had expected. I knew that even in its heyday it had not been as populated as King City is, but they built more above the surface in those days. King City is not much more than a landing field and a few domes. Old Archimedes was chock-a-block with structures, all clustered around the central landing field. Halo pointed out some interesting buildings to the south.

and so I went over there and set down next to them.

She opened the door and threw out the tent, then jumped after it. I followed, taking the ladder since I seemed elected to carry the lunch. She took a quick look around and started unpacking the tent.

“We’ll go exploring later,” she said, breathlessly. “Right now let’s get in the tent and eat. I’m hungry.”

All right, all right, I said to myself. I’ve got to face it sooner or later. I didn’t think she was really all that hungry—not for the picnic lunch, anyway. This was still going too fast for me. I had no idea what our relationship would be when we crawled out of that tent.

While she was setting it up, I took a more leisurely look around. Before long I was wishing we had gone to Tranquillity Base instead. It wouldn’t have been as private, but there are no spooks at Tranquillity. Come to think of it, Tranquillity Base used to be on the Nearside, before they moved it.

About Old Archimedes:

I couldn’t put my finger on what disturbed me about the place. Not the silence. The race has had to adjust to silence since we were forced off the Earth and took to growing up on the junk planets of the system. Not the lack of people. I was accustomed to long walks on the surface where I might not see anyone for hours. I don’t know. Maybe it was the Earth hanging there a little above the horizon.

It was in crescent phase, and I wished uselessly for the old days when that dark portion would have been sprayed with points of light that were the cities of mankind. Now there was only the primitive night and the dolphins in the sea and the aliens—bogies cooked up to ruin the sleep of a child, but not I was not so sure. If humans still survive down there, we have no way of knowing it.

They say that’s what drove people to the Farside: the constant reminder of what they had lost always there in the sky. It must have been hard, especially to the Earthborn. Whatever the reason, no one had lived on the Nearside for almost a century. All the original settlements had dwindled and people migrated to the comforting empty sky of Farside.

I think that’s what I felt, hanging over the old buildings like some invisible moss. It was the aura of fear and despair left by all the people who had buried their hopes here and moved away to the forgetfulness of Farside. There were ghosts here, all right: the shades of unfulfilled dreams and endless longing. And over it all a bottomless sadness.

I shook myself and came back to the present. Halo had the tent ready. It bulged up on the empty field, a clear bubble just a little higher than my head. She was already inside. I crawled through the sphincter, and she sealed it behind me.

Halo’s tent was a good one. The floor was about three meters in diameter, plenty of room for several people if you didn’t mind an occasional kick. It had a stove, a stereo set, and a compact toilet. It recycled water, scavenged CO₂, controlled temperature, and could provide hydroponic oxygen for three lunations. And it all folded into a cube thirty centimeters on a side.

Halo had skinned out of her suit as soon as the door was sealed and was bustling about, setting up the kitchen. She took the lunch hamper from me and started to work.

I watched her with keen interest as she prepared the food. I wanted to get an insight into what she was feeling. It wasn’t easy. Every fuse in her head seemed to have blown.

First-timers often overreact, seeking a new identity for themselves before it dawns on them that there was nothing wrong with the old one. Since our society offers so little differentiation between the self

roles, they reach back to where the differences are so vivid and startling: novels, dramas, films, and tapes from the old days on Earth and the early years on the moon. They have the vague idea that since they have this new body and it lacks a penis or vagina, they should behave differently.

I recognized the character she had fallen into; I'm as interested in old culture as the next kid. She was Blondie and I was supposed to be Dagwood. The Bumsteads, you know. Typical domestic nineteenth-century couple. She had spread a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth and set two places with dishes, napkins, washbowls, and a tiny electric candelabra.

I had to smile at her, kneeling at the tiny stove, trying to put three pans on the same burner. She was trying so hard to please me with a role I was completely uninterested in. She was humming as she worked.

After the meal, I offered to clean up for her (well, *Dagwood* would have), but Blondie said no, that's all right, dear, I'll take care of everything. I lay flat on my back, holding my belly, and watched the Earth. Presently I felt a warm body cuddle up, half beside me and half on top of me, and press close from toenails to eyebrows. She had left Blondie over among the dirty dishes. The woman who breathed in my ear now was—Helen of Troy? Greta Garbo?—someone new, anyway. I wished fervently that Halo would come back. I was beginning to think Halo and I could screw like the very devil if this feverish creature that contained her would only give us a chance. Meantime, I had to be raped by Helen of Troy. I raised my head.

“What's it like, Halo?”

She slowed her foreplay slightly, but it never really stopped. She propped herself up on one elbow.

“I don't think I can describe it to you.”

“Please try.”

She dimpled. “I don't really know what it's *all* like,” she said. “I'm still a virgin, you know.”

I sat up. “You got *that*, too?”

“Sure, why not? But don't worry about it. I'm not afraid.”

“What about making love?”

“Oh, Fox, Fox! Yes, yes. I . . .”

“No, no! Wait a minute.” I squirmed beneath her, trying to hold her off a little longer. “What I meant was, wasn't there any problem in making the shift? I mean, do you have any aversion to having sex with boys now?” It was sure a stupid question, but she took it seriously.

“I haven't noticed any problem so far,” she said, thoughtfully, as her hand reached down and I fumbled, inexpertly trying to guide me in. I helped her get it right, and she poised, squatting on her toes. “I thought about that before the Change, but it sort of melted away. Now I don't feel any qualms at all. Ahhhhh!” She had thrust herself down, brutally hard, and we were off and running.

It was the most unsatisfactory sex act I ever had. It was not entirely the fault of either of us. External events were about to mess us up totally. But it wasn't very good even without that.

A first-time female Changer is liable to be in delirious oblivion through the entire first sex act, which may last all of sixty seconds. The fact that she is playing the game from the other court with a different set of rules and a new set of equipment does not handicap her. Rather, it provides a tremendous erotic stimulus.

That's what happened to Halo. I began to wonder if she'd wait for me. I never found out. I looked

away from her face and got the shock of my life. There was someone standing outside the tent watching us.

Halo felt the change in me and looked at my face, which must have been a sight, then looked over her shoulder. She fainted; out like a light.

Hell, I almost fainted myself. Would have, but when she did, it scared me even more, and I decided I couldn't indulge it. So I stayed awake to see what was going on.

It looked way too much like one of the ghosts my imagination had been walking through the abandoned city ever since we got there. The figure was short and dressed in a suit that might have been stolen from the museum at Kepler, except that it was more patches than suit. I could tell little about who might be in it, not even the sex. It was bulky, and the helmet was reflective.

I don't know how long I stared at it; long enough for the spook to walk around the tent three or four times. I reached for the bottle of white wine we had been drinking and took a long pull. I found out that's an old movie cliché; it didn't make anything any better. But it sure did things for Halo when I poured it in her face.

"Get in your suit," I said, as she sat up, sputtering. "I think that character wants to talk to us." He was waving at us and pointing to what might have been a radio on his suit.

We suited up and crawled through the sphincter. I kept saying hello as I ran through the channels of my suit. Nothing worked. Then he came over and touched helmets. He sounded far away.

"What're you doin' here?"

I had thought that would have been obvious.

"Sir, we just came over here for a picnic. Are we on your land or something? If so, I'm sorry, and . . ."

"No, no." He waved it off. "You can do as you please. I ain't your ma. As to owning, I guess I own this whole city, but you're welcome to do as you please with most of it. Do as you please, that's my philosophy. That's why I'm still here. They couldn't get old Lester to move out. I'm old Lester."

"I'm Fox, sir," I said.

"And I'm Halo." She heard us over my radio.

He turned and looked at her.

"Halo," he said, quietly. "A Halo for an angel. Nice name, miss." I was wishing I could see his face. He sounded like an adult, but he was sure a small one. Both of us were taller than he was, and we were not much above average for our age.

He coughed. "I, ah, I'm sorry I disturbed you folks . . . ah." He seemed embarrassed. "I just couldn't help myself. I haven't seen any people for a long time—oh, ten years, I guess—and I just had to get a closer look. And I, uh, I needed to ask you something."

"And what's that, sir?"

"You can knock off the 'sir.' I ain't your pa. I wanted to know if you folks had any medicine?"

"There's a first-aid kit in the jumper," I said. "Is there someone in need of help? I'd be glad to take them to a hospital in King City."

He was waving his arms frantically.

"No, no, no. I don't want doctors poking around. I just need a little medicine. Uh, say, could you

take that first-aid kit out of the jumper and come to my warren for a bit? Maybe you got something there I could use.”

We agreed, and followed him across the field.

He led us into an unpressurized building at the edge of the field. We threaded our way through dark corridors.

We came to a big cargo lock, stepped inside, and he cycled it. Then we went through the inner door and into his warren.

It was quite a place, more like a jungle than a home. It was as big as the Civic Auditorium at King City and overgrown with trees, vines, flowers, and bushes. It looked like it had been tended at one time, but allowed to go wild. There were a bed and a few chairs in one corner, and several tall stacks of books. And heaps of junk; barrels of leak sealant, empty O₂ cylinders, salvaged instruments, bug tires.

Halo and I had our helmets off and were half out of our suits when we got our first look at him. He was incredible! I'm afraid I gasped, purely from reflex; Halo just stared. Then we politely tried to pretend there was nothing unusual.

He looked like he made a habit of going out without his suit. His face was grooved and pitted like a plowed field after an artillery barrage. His skin looked as tough as leather. His eyes were sunk in deep pits.

“Well, let me see it,” he said, sticking out a thin hand. His knuckles were swollen and knobby.

I handed him the first-aid kit, and he fumbled with the catches, then got it open. He sat in a chair and carefully read the label on each item. He mumbled while he read.

Halo wandered among the plants, but I was more curious about old Lester than about his home. I watched him handle the contents of the kit with stiff, clumsy fingers. All his movements seemed stiff. I couldn't imagine what might be wrong with him and wondered why he hadn't sought medical help long ago, before whatever was afflicting him could go this far.

At last he put everything back in the kit but two tubes of cream. He sighed and looked at us.

“How old are you?” he asked, suspiciously.

“I'm twenty,” I said. I don't know why. I'm not a liar, usually, unless I have a good reason. I was just beginning to get a funny feeling about old Lester, and I followed my instincts.

“Me, too,” Halo volunteered.

He seemed satisfied, which surprised me. I was realizing he had been out of touch for a long time. Just how long I didn't know yet.

“There ain't much here that'll be of use to me, but I'd like to buy these here items, if you're willing to sell. Says here they're for 'topical anesthesia,' and I could use some of that in the mornings. How much?”

I told him he could have them for nothing, but he insisted; so I told him to set his own price and reached for my credit meter in my suit pouch. He was holding out some rectangular slips of paper. They were units of paper currency, issued by the old Lunar Free State in the year 76 O.E. They had never been used in over a century. They were worth a fortune to a collector.

“Lester,” I said, slowly, “these are worth more than you probably realize. I could sell them in King City for . . .”

He cackled. “Good man. I know what them bills is worth. I’m decrepit, but I ain’t senile. They’re worth thousands to one who wants ’em, but they’re worthless to me. Except for one thing. They’re a damn good test for findin’ an honest man. They let me know if somebody’d take advantage of a sick, senile ol’ hermit like me. Pardon me, son, but I had you pegged for a liar when you come in here. I was wrong. So you keep the bills. Otherwise, I’d a took ’em back.”

He threw something on the floor in front of us, something he’d had in his hand and I hadn’t even seen. It was a gun. I had never seen one.

Halo picked it up, gingerly, but I didn’t want to touch it. This old Lester character seemed a lot less funny to me now. We were quiet.

“Now I’ve gone and scared you,” he said. “I guess I’ve forgot all my manners. And I’ve forgot how you folks live on the other side.” He picked up the gun and opened it. The charge chamber was empty. “But you wouldn’t of knowed it, would you? Anyways, I’m not a killer. I just pick my friends real careful. Can I make up the fright I’ve caused you by inviting you to dinner? I haven’t had any guests for ten years.”

We told him we’d just eaten, and he asked if we could stay and just talk for a while. He seemed awfully eager. We said okay.

“You want some clothes? I don’t expect you figured on visiting when you come here.”

“Whatever your custom is,” Halo said, diplomatically.

“I got no customs,” he said, with a toothless grin. “If you don’t feel funny naked, it ain’t no business of mine. Do as you please, I say.” It was a stock phrase with him.

So we lay on the grass, and he got some very strong, clear liquor and poured us all drinks.

“Moonshine,” he laughed. “The genuine article. I make it myself. Best liquor on the Nearside.”

We talked, and we drank.

Before I got too drunk to remember anything, a few interesting facts emerged about old Lester. For one thing, he really was old. He said he was two hundred and fifty-seven, and he was Earthborn. He had come to the moon when he was twenty-eight, several years before the Invasion.

I know several people in that age range, though none quite that old. Carnival’s great-grandmother was two twenty-one, but she’s moonborn, and doesn’t remember the Invasion. There’s virtually nothing left of the flesh she was born with. She’s transferred her memories to a new brain twice.

I was prepared to believe that old Lester had gone a long time without medical care, but I couldn’t accept what he told us at first. He said that, barring one new heart eighty years ago, he was unreconstructed since his birth! I’m young and naive—I freely admit it now—but I couldn’t swallow that. But I believed it eventually, and I believe it now.

He had a million stories to tell, all of them at least eighty years old because that’s how long he had been a hermit. He had stories of Earth, and of the early years on the moon. He told us about the hard years after the Invasion. Everyone who lived through that has a story to tell. I drew a blank before the evening was over, and the only thing I remember clearly is the three of us standing in a circle, arms around each other, singing a song old Lester had taught us. We swayed against each other and bumped foreheads and broke up laughing. I remember his hand resting on my shoulder. It was hard as rock.

The next day Halo became Florence Nightingale and nursed old Lester back to life. She was as firm as any nurse, getting him out of his clothes over his feeble protests, then giving him a massage. In the soberness of the morning I wondered how she could bring herself to touch his wrinkled old body, but as I watched, I slowly understood. He was beautiful.

The best thing to compare old Lester to is the surface. There is nothing older, or more abused, than the surface of the moon. But I have always loved it. It's the most beautiful place in the system including Saturn's Rings. Old Lester was like that. I imagined he *was* the moon. He had become part of it.

Though I came to accept his age, I could still see that he was in terrible shape. The drinking had taken a lot out of him, but he wouldn't be kept down. The first thing he wanted in the morning was another drink. I brought him one, then I cooked a big breakfast: eggs and sausage and bread and orange juice, all from his garden. Then we were off and drinking again.

I didn't even have time to worry about what Carnival and Halo's mother might be thinking by now. Old Lester had plainly adopted us. He said he'd be our father, which struck me as a funny thing to say since who the hell ever knows who their father is? But he began behaving in the manner I would call maternal, and he evidently thought of it as *paternal*.

We did a lot of things that day. He taught us about gardening.

He showed me how to cross-fertilize the egg plants and how to tell when they were ripe without breaking the shells to see. He told us the secrets of how to grow breadfruit trees so they'd yield loaves of dark-brown, hard, whole wheat or the strangely different rye variety by grafting branches. I had never had rye before. And we learned to dig for potatoes and steakroots. We learned how to harvest honey and cheese and tomatoes. We stripped bacon from the surface of the porktree trunks.

And we'd drink his moonshine while we worked, and laugh a lot, and he'd throw in more of his stories between the garden lore.

Old Lester was not the fool he seemed at first. His speech pattern was largely affected, something he did to amuse himself over the years. He could speak as correctly as anyone when he wanted to. He had read much and remembered it all. He was a first-rate engineer and botanist, but his education and skills had to be qualified by this fact: everything he knew was eighty years out of date. It didn't matter much: the old methods worked well enough.

In social matters it was a different story.

He didn't know much about Changing, except that he didn't like it. It was Changing that finally decided him to separate himself from society. He said he had been having his doubts about joining the migration to Farside, and the sex-change issue had been the final factor. He shocked us more than he knew when he revealed that he had never been a woman. I thought his lack of curiosity must be monumental, but I was wrong. It turned out that he had some queer notions about the morality of the whole process, ideas he had gotten from some weirdly aberrant religion in his childhood. I had heard of the cult, as you can hardly avoid it if you know any history. It had said little about ethics, being more interested in arbitrary regulations.

Old Lester still believed in it, though. His home was littered with primitive icons. There was a central symbol he cherished above the others: a simple wooden fetish in the shape of a plus sign with

long stem. He wore one around his neck, and others sprouted like weeds.

I came to realize that this religion was at the bottom of the puzzling inconsistencies I began notice about him. His “do as you please” may have been sincere, but he did not entirely live by it. It became clear that, though he thought people should have freedom of choice, he condemned them if the choice they made was not his own.

My spur-of-the-moment decision to lie about my age had been borne out, though I’m not sure the truth wouldn’t have been better. It might have kept us out of the further lies we told or implied, and I always prefer honesty to deception. But I still don’t know if old Lester could have been our friend without the lies.

He knew something of life on Farside and made it clear he disapproved of most of it. And he had deluded himself (with our help) that we weren’t like that. In particular, he thought people should not have sex until they reached a “decent age.” He never defined that, but Halo and I, at “twenty,” were safely past it.

It was a puzzling notion. Even Carnival, who is a bit old-fashioned, would have been shocked. Granted, we speed up puberty now—I have been sexually potent since I was seven—but he felt that even *after* puberty people should abstain. I couldn’t make any sense out of it. I mean, what would you *do*?

Then there was a word he used, “incest,” that I had to look up when I got home to be sure I understood him. I had. He was against it. I guess it had a basis back in the dawn of time, when procreation and genetics were so tied up with sex, but how could it matter now? The only place Carnival and I get along at all is in bed; without that, we would have very little in common.

It went on and on, the list of regulations. Luckily, it didn’t sour me on old Lester. All I disliked was the lies we had trapped ourselves into. I’m willing to let people have all sorts of screwball notions as long as they don’t force them on me, like Carnival was doing about the Change. That I found myself expressing agreement with old Lester’s ideas was my own fault, not his. I think.

The days went by, marred by only one thing. I had not broken any laws, but I knew I was being searched for. And I knew I was treating Carnival badly. I tried to figure out just how badly, and what I should do about it, but kept getting fogged up by the moonshine and good times.

Carnival had come to the Nearside. Halo and I had watched them from the shadows when old Lester’s radar had picked them up coming in. There had been six or seven figures in the distance. They had entered the jumper and made a search. They had cast around at the edge of the field for our tracks, found them, and followed them to where they disappeared on concrete. I would have liked to have listened in, but didn’t dare because they were sure to have detection apparatus for that.

And they left. They left the jumper, which was nice of them, since they could have taken it and rendered us helpless to wait for their return.

I thought about it, and talked it over with Halo. Several times we were ready to give up and go back. After all, we hadn’t really set out to run away from home. We had only been defying authority, and I had never entered my head that we would stay as long as we had. But now that we were here we found it hard to go back. The trip to Nearside had acquired an inertia of its own, and we didn’t have the strength to stop it.

In the end we went to the other extreme. We decided to stay on Nearside forever. I think we were giddy with the sense of power a decision like that made us feel. So we covered up our doubts with

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