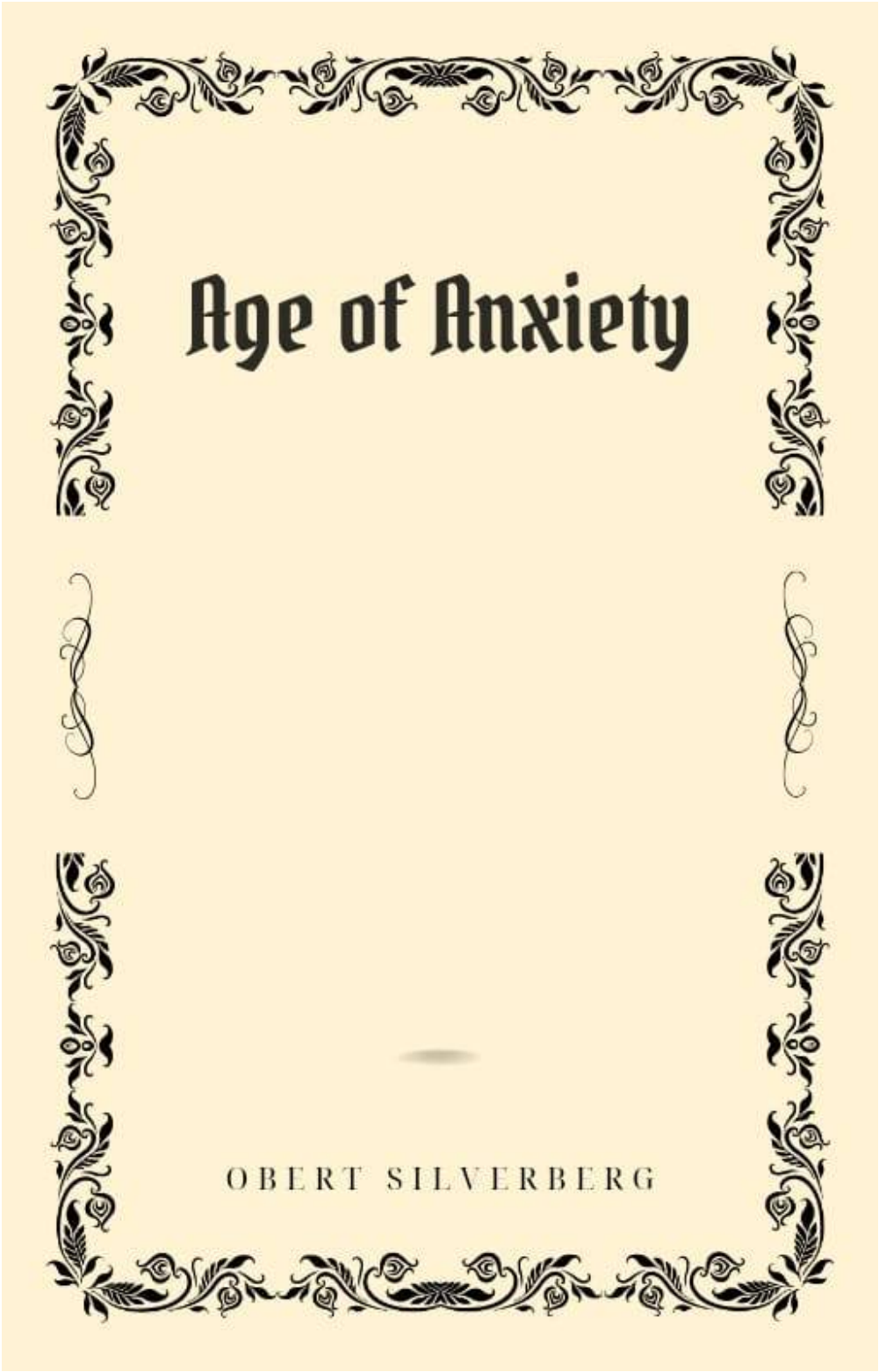
Age of Anxiety
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That morning, when Larry awoke, the robonurse was standing at the foot of his bed, smiling benignly. It made no attempt to help him into his housecoat and give him his morning unworry capsule. Instead it waited, poised delicately on its humming treads, making no motion toward him.

"I'm awake," Larry said sourly. "Why aren't you functioning?" He paused, frowning slightly, and added, "And where's my capsule?"

"This morning is different," said the robonurse. "This is your birthday, young man!" It clicked twice, hissed, and rolled forward at last, holding Larry's capsule-box in its grips. The box flew open as the robot approached Larry's bed, and the boy saw, within its gleaming interior, *three* capsules—one the usual light blue, the other two a harsh green and a bright yellow respectively.

"What's this?"

"*Choose*," the robonurse said inexorably.

The trigger-word echoed in the room for an instant. "*Choose*," the robot said again, and the repetition unlocked a chain of synapses, unleashed data hypnotically buried in Larry's mind years before, opened doors and brightened dark corridors.

Choose. The terrifying word held promise of conflict, pain, anxiety. Larry's fingers quivered with terror for a moment; his hand hovered over the capsule-box, wavered for a long second of indecision, while a glistening bead of sweat rolled down his smooth face.

His hand grazed the light-blue capsule, the capsule that could end the sudden nightmare forever. He fingered its glossy surface for a moment, then shook his head and touched the bright yellow one. A shudder of fear ran through him as he did so, and he swept up the green capsule hurriedly and swallowed it.

"Okay. I've chosen," he said weakly.

The robonurse, still smiling, closed the capsule-box and rolled away. It replaced the box on its shelf and said, "You've chosen, Larry—but all you've chosen is postponement of final decision."

"I know." His voice was dry. "I—I'm not ready yet. But at least I took a step forward. I didn't take the unworry drug."

"True enough," the robonurse said. "You can still go in either direction—back to the unworry of childhood, or on to the full anxiety of adult life."

"Let me think," Larry said. "That's why I took the middle capsule. To think this out."

"Yes, let him think!" Larry glanced up and saw the stooped figure of his father at the door of the bedroom. The robonurse scuttled away hummingly, and Larry swung around in bed. His father's face, wrinkle-etched, baggy-eyed, and despairing, stared intently at him.

The tired face broke into a feeble grin. "So you've arrived at the Age of Anxiety at last, Larry! Welcome—welcome to adulthood!"

Behind Larry lay an entire seventeen-year lifetime of unworrying—and behind that lay the three centuries since Koletsky's development of the unworry drug.

It was tasteless, easily manufactured, inexpensive, and—despite its marvelous properties—not permanently habit-forming. Adults under the influence of the unworry drug found themselves free from anxiety, from nagging doubts about the future, from any need to worry or grow ulcers or to plan and think ahead. Koletsky's drug made them completely irresponsible.

Naturally, the drug was highly popular among a certain group of adults with low psychic resistance to panaceas of this sort, and for a while the unworry drug was a considerable source of worry to those still clear-eyed enough to look ahead. Hundreds of thousands of people a year were yielding to the synthetic bliss of the unworry drug, returning to childhood's uninvolvement with the world.

Naturally, one of the remaining worriers invented an anti-unworry drug—and with that, a new social alignment came into being. The new tablet provided gradual weaning from the unworry drug; it took four years for the treatment to be completed, but once so treated a person could never bring himself to touch the Koletsky drug to his lips again. There was an inflexible guarantee against back-sliding built into the bonded hydrocarbons of the drug.

This second discovery left the world in possession of two remarkable phenomena: a soothing drug and its antidote, both of 100% efficiency. A new solution now presented itself—a solution whose details were simple and obvious.

Give the drug to children. Let them live in a carefree paradise of unworry until the age of seventeen—at which time, apply the four-year withdrawal treatment. At twenty-one, they were ready to step into the adult world, unmarked by the horrors of childhood and equipped to face maturity with a calm, if somewhat blank mind.

At the age of seventeen, then, a choice: forward or backward. One out of every ten elected to remain in the synthetic dream-world forever, thereby removing themselves from a world in which they probably would not have been fit to contend. It was an efficient screening process, eliminating those dreamers who would not have withstood the grind, who would have retreated from reality anyway, would have slipped into neurotic fancies. The remaining ninety per cent chose maturity and reality—and anxiety.

The light-blue capsule was the way back to dreamland; the bright yellow one, the first step in withdrawal. The third capsule was the one most frequently chosen. It was a delayer; its effect, neither positive nor negative, was to allow its taker's hormones to remain suspended during the period of choice.

"I've got three days, don't I, Dad?" The terms of the situation, implanted in each child's mind long before he could possibly understand the meanings of the words, now stood out sharply in Larry's mind.

Larry's father nodded. "You took the green one?"

"Yes. Was that wrong?"

"It's what I did when I was your age," the older man said. "It's the only sensible thing to do. Yes, you have three days to make up your mind. You can go on taking the unworry capsules for the rest of your life—or you can begin withdrawing. You'll have to decide that for yourself."

Something fluttery throbbed in the pit of Larry's stomach. It was the first sign of worry, the first agony of decision-making. He remained calm; despite his lifelong use of Koletsky's drug, its peculiar properties were such that he felt no need of it now.

Yet—how did he choose? In three days, how? Uneasily, he wiggled his feet against the cool, yielding surface of the floor for a moment, left the bed, crossed the room, threw open the door. Across the hall, the robonurse was ministering to his younger brother. The sleepy-eyed eight-year-old was sitting up in bed while the pseudomother washed and dressed him.

Larry smiled. His brother's face was calm, relaxed, confident-looking.

"The lucky devil," he said out loud. "He's got nine years of happiness left."

"You can have the rest of your lifetime, son."

Larry turned. His father's voice was flat, without any hint of emotion or any trace of value-judgment.

"I know," Larry said. "One way—or the other."

Later that first day, he dressed and left the house. He crossed the pedestrian-walk that led from his block to the next, feeling curiously impermanent in his between-status status.

The pedestrian-walk was empty except for a wandering vendor struggling along under a load of bubble-toys. Larry doubled his pace and caught up with the man, a short, long-nosed individual with worry-creases furrowing his thin face.

"Hello, son. Got your bubble-ship yet?" He held forth the inflatable vehicle and smiled—a forced, slick smile that faded when the vendor noticed the luminescent armband that told of Larry's status. "Oh—a Changer," the vendor said. "I guess you wouldn't be interested in a bubble-ship, then."

"I guess not." Larry took the toy from the vendor's hand anyway, and examined it. "You make these yourself?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I get them from the Distributory." The vendor scowled and shook his head. "They keep cutting down my allotment all the time. I don't know how I'll stay in business."

"Why? Won't there always be a market?"

"There must be something new out," the vendor said gloomily. "The young ones just aren't interested in bubble-toys these days. Things were good last year, but—" he frowned dismally—"they're getting worse all the time."

"Sorry to hear that," Larry sympathized. He felt vaguely disturbed—the bubble-toys were vastly popular among his friends, and it was upsetting to learn that the vendor was doing so badly. "I wish I could do something for you."

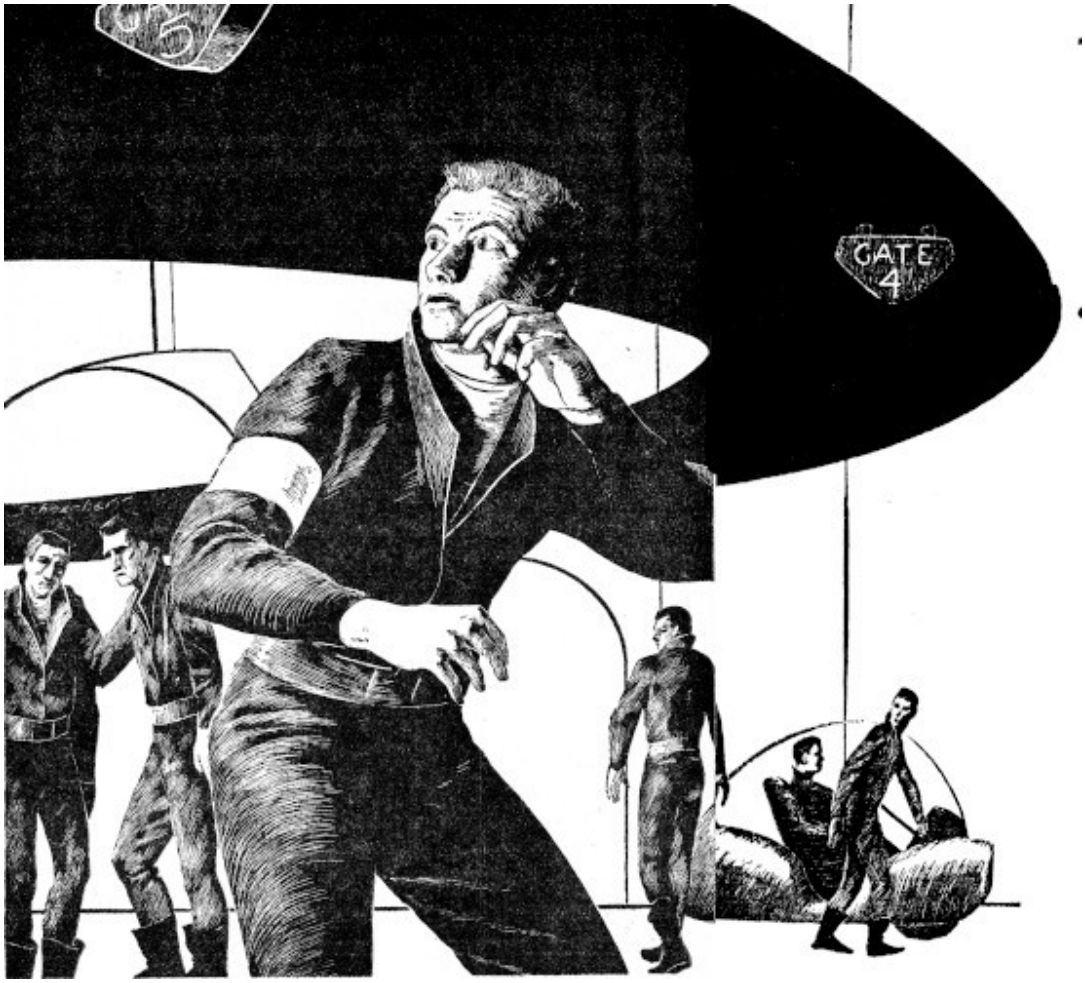
"Don't worry about me, son. You've got your own problems now." The vendor smiled bleakly at him and turned off the pedestrian-walk into the side-road that led to the Playground, leaving Larry alone.

Those were strange words, he thought. He revolved them in his mind, getting used to their feel. *You've got your own problems.* He looked around, at the neat, clean suburb with its attractive little ten-story units and carefully-spaced splotches of green garden, and shook his head. *Problems. To be or not to be.* It was a line from an old play he had found taped in his father's library.

The play had made no sense to him at the time, but now it troubled him. He made a mental note to ask his father about it, some time in the next two days, and walked on. He wanted to see as much as he could of the adult world, before it was time to decide which he preferred.

The City was a maze of connected buildings, redoubled avenues, tangled byways and confusing signs. Larry stood in the heart of the business district, watching the grownups zoom past him, each walking alone, face set determinedly as he pursued some private mission.

"Move along, boy," someone said roughly. Larry glanced around, saw a man in uniform scowling at him. The scowl softened into something like pity as the man noticed the badge of Larry's status. Hastily, Larry walked on, moving deeper into the web of the City.



He had never been here before. The City was someplace where fathers went during the day, during the pleasant hours of school and Playground, and from which fathers came, grimy and irritable, in the evening. Larry had never considered going to the City before. Now it was necessary.

He had no particular destination in mind. But after seventeen years in the unworrying world, he would simply have to investigate the world of anxiety before making up his mind.

A car buzzed by suddenly, and he leaped to one side. Out here in the City, cars ran right next to the pedestrian-walks, not on flying skyways above them. Larry hugged the side of a building for a moment, recovering his calm.

Calm. Stay calm. Make a cool, objective appraisal.

But how?

Nine out of ten people picked this world. Larry ran his fingers over the rough brick of the building, and felt the tension beginning to curdle his stomach. Nine out of ten. *Am I the tenth? Am I going to decide to go back to a lifetime of unworry?*

It seemed so. This dirty, hypertense, overcrowded place seemed boundlessly undesirable. The choice was obvious.

But still....

He shook his head. After a moment of complete unthought, he let go of the side of the building and took a few hesitant steps forward. He was really frightened now. Suddenly, he wanted to be home, wanted to know again the smooth placidity of an unworried day.

He started to walk faster, then to run. After half a block, he stopped, suddenly.

Where am I running?

He didn't know. He felt trapped, hemmed in, overwhelmed by despair.

So this is the City? Sorry, I don't care for it.

"You're all alone, aren't you?" said a sudden voice from behind him. "It's not wise, on your first day off the drug."

Larry turned. The man behind him was tall and narrow-shouldered, with the pinched, baggy face of a grownup and a wide, sly smile. "Yes, I'm all alone," he said.

"I thought so. I can tell a Changer when I see one, even without the armband."

Larry glanced down at his arm quickly and saw that the identifying armband was gone. Somehow, somewhere, he must have ripped it off. He looked at the stranger, and in a hoarse voice asked, "What do you want?"

"A companion for a drink," the stranger said affably. "Care to join me?"

"No—I—all right," Larry said with a firmness that surprised himself. "Let's go have a drink."

The alcohol stung his mouth, and the flavoring in the drink tasted rancid, but he put the whole thing down and looked across the table at the stranger.

"I don't much like that drink," he said.

"Not surprising." The other grinned. "It's one of our favorites."

"*Our?*"

"City people, I mean. Ulcer people. We gobble the stuff up. Not surprising you don't like it."

Larry touched his forefingers lightly together. "I don't think I'd ever like it, no matter how long I tried to get used to it."

"Oh?" The stranger's left eyebrow rose slightly. "*Never?*"

Larry shook his head. "Or the rest of the City, for that matter." He sighed. "I don't think I'm the City type. I think I'm going to give the whole thing up and go back home. The City isn't for me."

"Have another drink," the stranger said. "Go on—I'll pay. It'll take your mind off your problems."

"There's a capsule that'll do it a lot more efficiently," Larry said. "I don't need bad-tasting drinks to ease my mind."

"You're definitely cashing in your chips, then?"

"What?"

"I mean, you're definitely choosing Koletsky for life, eh?"

Larry paused a while, letting the images of the City filter through his mind again. Finally he nodded. "I think so. I really do."

"Two full days more—and you've made up your mind?" The stranger shook his head. "That'll never do, son. You'll have to think more deeply."

"How deep do I have to think?"

"Tell me what anxiety is," the stranger countered.

Taken aback by the sudden and seemingly irrelevant question, Larry blinked. "Anxiety? Why—worry, isn't it? Fear? Ulcers and headaches?"

The stranger shook his head slowly and dialed another drink. "Anxiety is the feeling that things are too good, that you're riding for a fall," he said carefully. "It's a sense of things about to get worse."

Larry remembered the bubble-vendor and nodded. "But they have to be pretty good to start with, don't they?"

"Right. You've got to have something pretty good—and be worried that you're going to lose it. Then you fight to keep it. Challenge—response. That's anxiety. Fear's something different. Then you creep into the corner and shake. Or you hang onto the side of a wall."

"I think I'll take another drink," Larry said thoughtfully.

"You get what I mean? Anxiety pushes and prods you, but it doesn't make you shrivel. You've got to be strong to stand up under it. That's how our world works."

"So?"

"You haven't experienced any real anxiety yet, boy. Just fear—and you're reacting out of fear. You can't judge your response to something if you're really responding to something else."

Larry frowned and gulped his drink. It tasted a little better, this time, though only imperceptibly so. "You mean I'm deciding too quickly, then? That I ought to look around the City a little longer?"

"Yes and no," the stranger said. "You're deciding much too quickly—yes. But looking around the City won't do. No; go back home."

"Home?"

"Home. Go back to your Playground. Look there. Then decide."

Larry nodded slowly. "Sure," he said. "Sure—that's it." He felt the tension drain out of him. "I think I'll have one more drink before I go."

The Playground was crowded on the second day of Larry's three-day period. Small children played happily near the shimmering wading pond, older ones gathered for games in the playing-field farther on, and, far in the distance, a group of permanent unworriers sat complacently in the sun, neither thinking nor moving. Humming robonurses threaded here and there through the Playground, seeing to it that no one got into any trouble. They were necessary, of course—because the unworried children would have no fear of leaping from a tree head-first or walking into the path of a speeding baseball.

Larry stood at the edge of the Playground, leaning against the confining fence, watching. His friends were there—the boys he had played with only two days before, still happily occupied with their games and their bubble-toys. Walking carefully, in order not to be seen, he skirted the side of the playing area and headed for the green fields where the Permanents were.

There were about a hundred of them, of all ages. Larry recognized a former playmate of his—a boy of about nineteen, now—and there were older men, too, some well along in middle age. They sat quietly, unmoving, most of them, smiling pleasantly.

Larry entered the field and walked to the nearest bench.

"Mind if I join you?"

The man on the bench grinned. "Not at all. Sit right down, friend."

Larry sat. "You're a Permanent, aren't you?" he asked suddenly.

A shadow seemed to cross the man's face. "Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I'm a Permanent. Who are you?"

"I'm Changing," Larry said.

"Oh."

The Permanent studied him idly for a moment or two, then leaned back and closed his eyes. "It's nice here," he said. "The sun's warm."

Larry frowned. "What do you do when it rains?"

"We go indoors," the Permanent said.

"Look! I think it's starting to rain now!" Larry pointed at the bright, cloudless sky. "There'll be a terrible thunderstorm any minute!"

"The robonurses should be here, then."

"Yes!" Larry said. "Where are they? Why aren't they here?"

"They'll be here," the Permanent said blandly.

"I don't think so. I don't think they're coming. They're going to let you get wet."

The Permanent shrugged. "They wouldn't do that," he said.

"Of course not," a new voice said.

Larry glanced up, startled. The copper-alloy face of a robonurse looked down at him. He goggled confusedly.

The robonurse's grips seized his shoulders gently. "You'll have to leave here, boy. We can't have you disturbing these people."

Larry stood up. "All right," he said. "I'll go." He had seen all he needed to see.

The stranger in the City had been right, Larry thought, as he made his way back to his home. The place to look had been in the Playground. He *had* seen something even more frightening than the City.

His father was waiting for him as he entered.

"Well?"

Larry sat down heavily in a pneumochair and knit his hands together. "I've seen the Playground," he said. "Yesterday the City, today the Playground. What's left to see?"

"You've seen it all, son."

Larry studied his father's pale, harried face for a moment. "I thought the City was pretty horrible. I decided yesterday I'd become a Permanent."

"I know. Your Watcher told me."

"Watcher?"

"You know—the man who took you in for drinks. You don't think I'd let you go into the City alone, do you?"

Larry smiled. "I *thought* it was too neat, the way he met me and sent me back. But—but—"

He looked up helplessly at his father. "Today I saw the Playground, Dad. And I don't know what to do." His voice trailed off indistinctly.

"What's the trouble, son?"

"Tomorrow I have to make my choice. Well, the Playground seems to be out—they turn into vegetables there—but am I ready for the City?"

"I don't understand, Larry."

"I was sickened by the place." He leaned forward and said, "Dad, why are children raised on the unworry drug?"

"We try to spare you," his father said. "Seventeen years of tranquility—it's good, isn't it?"

"Not when it ends. It's the worst possible preparation for a life in your world, Dad. I'm not ready for it—and I never will be! My childhood hasn't taught me how to worry!"

Suddenly, his father began to chuckle, first deep in his stomach, then high up in his throat, a ratchety, rasping laugh.

"What's the matter?" Larry asked angrily. "What's so funny?"

"You say you don't know how to worry? Why, you're practically an expert at it!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Suppose you tell me what you've been thinking of, the past two days. Everything."

Larry stood up, walked to the door. The robonurse was waiting in the next room, patient, unmoving. After a moment, he turned to his father. "Well—I've been thinking that I don't like the City. That I'm afraid I wasn't properly prepared for it. That I think raising me on the unworry drug robbed me of any chance I'd have to learn to stand the strains of City life. That even so I don't like the Playground either, and I'm caught between." He checked each item off on his fingers. "That—"

"That's enough, Larry. You've analyzed it nicely."

Slowly, the truth opened out before him and an embarrassed grin widened on his face. Resistance to strain could be acquired overnight—by nine out of ten. Nine out of ten didn't need a long, grueling childhood to prepare them for adulthood; the tenth would never grow up anyway.

"I've *been* worrying," he said. "I'm the worrying kind. I've been worrying since yesterday, and I didn't even know it!"

His father nodded. Larry took the capsule-box from its shelf, opened it, stared at the three different kinds of capsule inside. "There never really was any choice after all, was there?"

"No. Your choice was made yesterday morning. If you didn't have the stuff for City life, you'd have grabbed for the unworry capsule the second you saw it. But you didn't. You stopped to make a decision—and won your citizenship right then and there. You proved it to us—and by fighting with yourself over the decision you thought you still had to make, you proved it to yourself."

Larry's smile spread. "Sure. The ability to worry is the measure of successful City life," he said. "And I'm a regular worry wart already." The excitement of the past two days still thumped in his stomach—and it was only the beginning. "I belong *here*. Why—it won't be long before I'll get my first ulcer!"

His father was radiant with paternal pride. "Welcome to your heritage, son—the heritage of the civilized man. You've got the makings of a first-rate citizen!"