

The Last Place On Earth

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Freeeditorial 

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I

Sam Collins flashed the undertaker a healthy smile, hoping it wouldn't depress old Candle too much. He saluted. The skeletal figure in endless black nodded gravely, and took hold of Sam Collins' arm with a death grip.

"I'm going to bury you, Sam Collins," the undertaker said.

The tall false fronts of Main Street spilled out a lake of shadow, a canal of liquid heat that soaked through the iron weave of Collins' jeans and turned into black ink stains. The old window of the hardware store showed its age in soft wrinkles, ripples that had caught on fire in the sunset. Collins felt the twilight stealing under the arms of his tee-shirt. The overdue hair on the back of his rangy neck stood up in attention. It was a joke, but the first one Collins had ever known Doc Candle to make.

"In time, I guess you'll bury me all right, Doc."

"In my time, not yours, Earthling."

"Earthling?" Collins repeated the last word.

The old man frowned. His face was a collection of lines. When he frowned, all the lines pointed to hell, the grave, decay and damnation.

"Earthling," the undertaker repeated. "Earthman? Terrestrial? Solarian? Space Ranger? Homo sapiens?"

Collins decided Candle was sure in a jokey mood. "Kind of makes you think of it, don't it, Doc? The spaceport going right up outside of town. Rocketships are going to be out there taking off for the Satellite, the Moon, places like that. Reminds you that we are Earthlings, like they say in the funnies, all right."

"Not outside town."

"What?"

"Inside. Inside town. Part of the spaceship administration building is going to go smack in the middle of where your house used to be."

"My house is."

"For less time than you will be yourself, Earthling."

"Earthling yourself! What's wrong with you, Doc?"

"No. I am not an Earthling. I am a superhuman alien from outer space. My mission on Earth is to destroy you."

Collins pulled away gently. When you lived in a town all your life and knew its people, it wasn't unusual to see some old person snap under the weight of years.

"You have to destroy the rocketship station, huh, Doc, before it sends up spaceships?"

"No. I want to kill you. That is my mission."

"Why?"

"Because," Candle said, "I am a basically evil entity."

The undertaker turned away and went skittering down Main Street, his lopsided gait limping, sliding, hopping, skipping, at a refined leisurely pace. He was a collection of dancing, straight black lines.

Collins stared after the old man, shook his head and forgot about him.

He moved into the hardware store. The bell tinkled behind him. The store was cramped with shadows and the smell of wood and iron. It was lined off as precisely as a checkerboard, with counters, drawers, compartments.

Ed Michaels sat behind the counter, smoking a pipe. He was a handsome man, looking young in the uncertain light, even at fifty.

"Hi, Ed. You closed?"

"Guess not, Sam. What are you looking for?"

"A pound of tenpenny nails."

Michaels stood up.

Sarah Comstock waddled energetically out of the back. Her sweet, angelic face lit up with a smile. "Sam Collins. Well, I guess you'll want to help us murder them."

"Murder?" Collins repeated. "Who?"

"Those Air Force men who want to come in here and cause all the trouble."

"How are you going to murder them, Mrs. Comstock?"

"When they see our petition in Washington, D.C., they'll call those men back pretty quick."

"Oh," Collins said.

Mrs. Comstock produced the scroll from her voluminous handbag. "You want to sign, don't you? They're going to put part of the airport on your place. They'll tear down your house."

"They can't tear it down. I won't sell."

"You know government men. They'll just take it and give you some money for it. Sign right there at the top of the new column, Sam."

Collins shook his head. "I don't believe in signing things. They can't take what's mine."

"But Sam, dear, they will. They'll come in and push your house down with those big tractors of theirs. They'll bury it in concrete and set off those guided missiles of theirs right over it."

"They can't make me get out," Sam said.

Ed Michaels scooped up a pound, one ounce of nails and spilled them onto his scale. He pinched off the excess, then dropped it back in and fed the nails into a brown paper bag. He crumpled the top and set it on the counter. "That's twenty-nine plus one, Sam. Thirty cents."

Collins laid out a quarter and a nickel and picked up the bag. "Appreciate you doing this after store hours, Ed."

Michaels chuckled. "I wasn't exactly getting ready for the opera, Sam."

Collins turned around and saw Sarah Comstock still waiting, the petition in her hand.

"Now what's a pretty girl like you doing, wasting her time in politics?" Collins heard himself ask.

Mrs. Comstock twittered. "I'm old enough to be your mother, Sam Collins."

"I like mature women."

Collins watched his hand in fascination as it reached out to touch one of Sarah Comstock's plump cheeks, then dropped to her shoulder and ripped away the strap-sleeve of her summer print dress.

A plump, rosy shoulder was revealed, splattered with freckles.

Sarah Comstock put her hands over her ears as if to keep from hearing her own shrill scream. It reached out into pure soprano range.

Sarah Comstock backed away, into the shadows, and Sam Collins followed her, trying to explain, to apologize.

"Sam! Sam!"

The voice cut through to him and he looked up.

Ed Michaels had a double-barreled shotgun aimed at him. Mrs. Michaels' face was looking over his shoulder in the door to the back, her face a sick white.

"You get out of here, Sam," Michaels said. "You get out and don't you come back. Ever."

Collins' hands moved emptily in air. He was always better with his hands than words, but this time even they seemed inexpressive.

He crumpled the sack of nails in both fists, and turned and left the hardware store.

II

His house was still there, sitting at the end of Elm Street, at the end of town, on the edge of the prairie. It was a very old house. It was decorated with gingerboard, a rusted-out tin rooster-comb running the peak of the roof and stained glass window transoms; and the top of the house was joined to the ground floor by lapped fishscales, as though it was a mermaid instead of a house. The house was a golden house. It had been painted brown against the dust, but the keening wind, the relentless sun, the savage rape of the thunderstorms, they had all bleached the brown paint into a shining pure gold.

Sam stepped inside and leaned back against the front door, the door of full-length glass with a border of glass emeralds and rubies. He leaned back and breathed deep.

The house didn't smell old. It smelled new. It smelled like sawdust and fresh-hewn lumber as bright and blond as a high school senior's crewcut.

He walked across the flowered carpet. The carpet didn't mind footsteps or bright sun. It never became worn or faded. It grew brighter with the years, the roses turning redder, the sunflowers becoming yellower.

The parlor looked the same as it always did, clean and waiting to be used. The cane-backed sofa and chairs eagerly waiting to be sat upon, the bead-shaded kerosene lamps ready to burst into light.

Sam went into his workshop. This had once been the ground level master bedroom, but he had had to make the change. The work table held its share of radios, toasters, TV sets, an electric train, a spring-wind Victrola. Sam threw the nails onto the table and crossed the room, running his fingers along the silent keyboard of the player piano. He looked out the window. The bulldozers had made the ground rectangular, level and brown, turning it into a gigantic half-cent stamp. He remembered the mail and raised the window and reached down into the mailbox. It was on this side of the house, because only this side was technically within city limits.

As he came up with the letters, Sam Collins saw a man sighting along a plumbline towards his house. He shut the window.

Some of the letters didn't have any postage stamps, just a line of small print about a \$300 fine. Government letters. He went over and forced them into the tightly packed coal stove. All the trash would be burned out in the cold weather.

Collins sat down and looked through the rest of his mail. A new catalogue of electronic parts. A bulky envelope with two paperback novels by Richard S. Prather and Robert Bloch he had ordered. A couple of letters from hams. He tossed the mail on the table and leaned back.

He thought about what had happened in the hardware store.

It wasn't surprising it had happened to him. Things like that were bound to happen to him. He had just been lucky that Ed Michaels hadn't called the sheriff. What had got into him? He had never been a sex maniac before! But still ... it was hardly unexpected.

Might as well wait to start on those rabbit cages until tomorrow, he decided. This evening he felt like exploring.

The house was so big, and packed with so many things that he never found and examined them all. Or if he did, he forgot a lot about the things between times, so it was like reading a favorite book over again, always discovering new things in it.

The parlor was red in the fading light, and the hall beyond the sliding doors was deeply shadowed. In the sewing room, he remembered, in the drawers of the treadle machine the radio was captured. The rings and secret manuals of the days when radio had been alive. He hadn't looked over those things in some little time.

He looked up the shadowed stairway. He remembered the night, a few weeks before Christmas when he had been twelve and really too old to believe, his mother had said she was going up to see if Santa Claus had left any packages around a bit early. They often gave him his presents early, since they were never quite sure he would live until Christmas.

But his mother had been playing a trick on him. She hadn't been going up after packages. She had gone up those stairs to murder his father.

She had shot him in the back of the head with his Army Colt .45 from the first war. Collins never quite understood why the hole in back was so neat and the one in front where it came out was so messy.

After he went to live with Aunt Amy and the house had been boarded up, he heard them talking, Aunt Amy and her boy friend, fat Uncle Ralph. And they had said his mother had murdered his father because he had gone ahead and made her get pregnant again and she was afraid it would be another one like Sam.

Sam Collins knew she must have planned it a long time in advance. She had filled up the bathtub with milk, real milk, and she went in after she had done it and took a bath in the milk. Then she slit her wrists.

When Sam Collins had run down the stairs, screaming, and barged into the bathroom, he had found the tub looking like a giant stick of peppermint candy.

Aunt Amy had been good to him.

Because he didn't talk for about a year after he found the bodies, most people thought he was simple-minded. But Aunt Amy had always treated him just like a regular boy. That was embarrassing sometimes, but still it was better than what he got from the others.

The doctor hadn't wanted to perform the operation on his clubfoot. He said it would be an unproductive waste of his time and talent, that he owed it to the world to use them to the very best advantage. Finally he agreed. The operation took about thirty seconds. He stuck a knife into Sam's foot and went snick-snick. A couple of weeks later, his foot was healed and it was just like anybody else's. Aunt Amy had paid him \$500 in payments, only he returned the money order for the last fifty dollars and wished them Merry Christmas.

Sam Collins could work after that. When Aunt Amy and Uncle Ralph disappeared, he opened up the old house and started doing odd jobs for people who weren't very afraid of him any more.

That first day had been quite a shock, when he discovered that not in all these years had anybody cleaned the bathtub.

Sometimes, when he was taking his Saturday night soaker he still got kind of a funny feeling. But he knew it was only rust from the faucets.

Collins sighed. It seemed like a long time since he had seen his mother coming down those stairs....

He stopped, his throat aching with tightness.

Something was very strange.

His mother was coming down the stairs right now.

She was walking down the stairs, one step, two steps, coming closer to him.

Collins ran up the stairs, prepared to run through the phantom to prove it wasn't there.

The figure raised a gun and pointed it at him.

This time, she was going to shoot him.

It figured.

He always had bad luck.

"Stop!" the woman on the stairs said. "Stop or I'll shoot, Mr. Collins!"

Collins stopped, catching to the bannister. He squinted hard, and as a stereoptic slide lost its depth when you shut one eye, the woman on the stairs was no longer his mother. She was young, pretty, brunette and sweet-faced, and the gun she held shrunk from an old Army Colt to a .22 target pistol.

"Who are you?" Collins demanded.

The girl took a grip on the gun with both hands and held it steady on him.

"I'm Nancy Comstock," she said. "You tried to assault my mother a half hour ago."

"Oh," he said. "I've never seen you before."

"Yes, you have. I've been away to school a lot, but you've seen me around. I've had my eye on you. I know about men like you. I know what has to be done. I came looking for you in your house for this."

The bore of the gun was level with his eye as he stood a few steps below her. Probably if she fired now, she would kill him. Or more likely he would only be blinded or paralyzed; that was about his luck.

"Are you going to use that gun?" he asked.

"Not unless I have to. I only brought it along for protection. I came to help you, Mr. Collins."

"Help me?"

"Yes, Mr. Collins. You're sick. You need help."

He looked the girl over. She was a half-dozen years younger than he was. In most states, she couldn't even vote yet. But still, maybe she could help, at that. He didn't know much about girls and their abilities.

"Why don't we go into the kitchen and have some coffee?" Collins suggested.

III

Nancy sipped her coffee and kept her eyes on his. The gun lay in her lap. The big kitchen was a place for coffee, brown and black, wood ceiling and iron stove and pans. Collins sat across the twelve square feet of table from her, and nursed the smoking mug.

"Sam, I want you to take whatever comfort you can from the fact that I don't think the same thing about you as the rest of Waraxe."

"What does the rest of the town think about me?"

"They think you are a pathological degenerate who should be lynched. But I don't believe that."

"Thanks. That's a big comfort."

"I know what you were after when you tore Mom's dress."

In spite of himself, Collins felt his face warming in a blush.

"You were only seeking the mother love you missed as a boy," the girl said.

Collins chewed on his lip a moment, and considered the idea. Slowly he shook his head.

"No," he said. "No. I don't think so."

"Then what do you think?"

"I think old Doc Candle made me do it. He said he was going to bury me. Getting me lynched would be one good way to do it. Ed Michaels almost blew my head off with his shotgun. It was close. Doc Candle almost made it. He didn't miss by far with you and that target pistol either."

"Sam—I may call you 'Sam'?—just try to think calmly and reasonably for a minute. How could Dr. Candle, the undertaker, possibly make you do a thing like you did in Mr. Michaels' hardware store?"

"Well ... he said he was a superhuman alien from outer space."

"If he said that, do you believe him, Sam?"

"Something made me do that. It just wasn't my own idea."

"It's easier that way, isn't it, Sam?" Nancy asked. "It's easy to say. 'It wasn't me; some space monster made me do it.' But you really know better, don't you, Sam? Don't take the easy way out! You'll only get deeper and deeper into your makebelieve world. It will be like quicksand. Admit your mistakes — face up to them — lick them."

Collins stood up, and came around the end of the table.

"You're too pretty to be so serious all the time," he said.

"Sam, I want to help you. Please don't spoil it by misinterpreting my intentions."

"You should get a little fun out of life," Collins listened to himself say.

He came on around the big table towards her.

The first time he hadn't realized what was happening, but this time he knew. Somebody was pulling strings and making him jump. He had as much control as Charlie McCarthy.

"Don't come any closer, Sam."

Nancy managed to keep her voice steady, but he could tell she was frightened.

He took another step.

She threw her coffee in his face.

The liquid was only lukewarm but the sudden dash had given him some awareness of his own body again, like the first sound of the alarm faintly pressing through deep layers of sleep.

"Sam, Sam, please don't make me do it! Please, Sam, don't!"

Nancy had the gun in her hand, rising from her chair.

His hands wanted to grab her clothes and tear.

But that's suicide, he screamed at his body.

As his hand went up with the intention of ripping, he deflected it just enough to shove the barrel of the gun away from him.

The shot went off, but he knew instantly that it had not hit him.

The gun fell to the floor, and with its fall, something else dropped away and he was in command of himself again.

Nancy sighed, and slumped against him, the left side of her breast suddenly glossy with blood.

Ed Michaels stared at him. Both eyes unblinking, just staring at him. He had only taken one look at the girl lying on the floor, blood all over her chest. He hadn't looked back.

"I didn't know who else to call, Ed." Collins said. "Sheriff Thurston being out of town and all."

"It's okay, Sam. Mike swore me in as a special deputy a couple years back. The badge is at the store."

"They'll hang me for this, won't they, Ed?"

Michaels put his hand on Collins' shoulder. "No, they won't do that to you, boy. We know you around here. They'll just put you away for a while."

"The asylum at Hannah, huh?"

"Damn it, yes! What did you expect? A marksman medal?"

"Okay, Ed, okay. Did you call Doc Van der Lies like I told you when I phoned?"

Michaels took a folded white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his square-jawed face. "You sure are taking this calm, Sam. I'm telling you, Sam, it would look better for you if you at least acted like you were sorry.... Doc Van der Lies is up in Wisconsin with Mike. I called Doc Candle."

"He's an undertaker," Collins whispered.

"Don't you expect we need one?" Michaels asked. Then as if he wasn't sure of the answer to his own question, he said, "Did you examine her to see if she was dead? I—I don't know much about women. I wouldn't be able to tell."

It didn't sound like a very good excuse to Collins.

"I guess she's dead," Collins said. "That's the way he must have wanted it."

"He? Wait a minute, Sam. You mean you've got one of those split personalities like that girl on TV the other night? There's somebody else inside you that takes over and makes you do things?"

"I never thought of it just like that before. I guess that's one way to look at it."

The knock shook the back door before Michaels could say anything. The door opened and Doc Candle slithered in disjointedly, a rolled-up stretcher over his shoulder.

"Hello, boys," Candle said. "A terrible accident, it brings sorrow to us all. Poor Nancy. Has the family been notified?"

"Good gosh, I forgot about it," Michaels said. "But maybe we better wait until you get her — arranged, huh, Doc?"

"Quite so." The old man laid the canvas stretcher out beside the girl on the floor and unrolled it. He flipped the body over expertly like a window demonstrator flipping a pancake over on a griddle.

"Ed, if you'd just take the front, I'll carry the rear. My vehicle is in the alley."

"Sam, you carry that end for Doc. You're a few years younger."

Collins wanted to say that he couldn't, but he didn't have enough yet to argue with. He picked up the stretcher and looked down at the white feet in the Scotch plaid slippers.

Candle opened the door and waited for them to go through.

The girl on the stretcher parted her lips and rolled her head back and forth, a puzzled expression of pain on her face.

Collins nearly dropped the stretcher, but he made himself hold on tight.

"Ed! Doc! She moved! She's still alive."

"Cut that out now, Sam," Ed Michaels snapped. "Just carry your end."

"She's alive," Collins insisted. "She moved again. Just turn around and take a look, Ed. That's all I ask."

"I hefted this thing once, and that's enough. You move, Sam. I've got a .38 in my belt, and I went to Rome, Italy, for the Olympics about the time you were getting yourself born, Sam. I ought to be able to hit a target as big as you. Just go ahead and do as you're told."

Collins turned desperately towards Candle. Maybe Nancy had been right, maybe he had been imagining things.

"Doc, you take a look at her," Collins begged.

The old man vibrated over to the stretcher and looked down. The girl twisted in pain, throwing her head back, spilling her hair over the head of the stretcher.

"Rigor mortis," Doc Candle diagnosed, with a wink to Collins.

"No, Doc! She needs a doctor, blood transfusions...."

"Nonsense," Candle snapped. "I'll take her in my black wagon up to my place, put her in the tiled basement. I'll pump out all her blood and flush it down the commode. Then I'll feed in Formaldi-Forever Number Zero. Formaldi-Forever, for the Blush of Death. 'When you think of a Pretty Girl, think of Formaldi-Forever, the Way to Preserve that Beauty.' Then I'll take a needle and some silk thread and just a few stitches on the eyelids and around the mouth...."

"Doc, will you...?" Michaels said faintly.

"Of course. I just wanted to show Sam how foolish he was in saying the Beloved was still alive."

Nancy kicked one leg off the stretcher and Candle picked it up and tucked it back in.

"Ed, if you'd just turn around and look," Collins said.

"I don't want to have to look at your face, you murdering son. You make me, you say one more word, and I'll turn around and shoot you between the eyes."

Doc Candle nodded. Collins knew then that Michaels really would shoot him in the head if he said anything more, so he kept quiet.

Candle held the door. They managed to get the stretcher down the back steps, and right into the black panel truck. They fitted the stretcher into the special sockets for it, and Doc Candle closed the double doors and slapped his dry palm down on the sealing crevice.

Instantly, there was an answering knock from inside the truck, a dull echo.

"Didn't you hear that?" Collins asked.

"Hear what?" Michaels said.

"What are you hearing now, Sam?" Candle inquired solicitously.

"Oh. Sure," Michaels said. "Kind of a voice, wasn't it, Sam? Didn't understand what it said. Wasn't listening too close, not like you."

Thud-thud-thump-thud.

"No voice," Collins whispered. "That infernal sound, don't you hear it, Ed?"

"I must hurry along," the undertaker said. "Must get ready to work on Nancy, get her ready for her parents to see."

"All right, Doc. I'll take care of Sam."

"Where you going to jail me, Ed?" Collins asked, his eyes on the closed truck doors. "In your storeroom like you did Hank Petrie?"

Michaels' face suddenly began to work. "Jail? Jail you? Jail's too good for you. Doc, have you got a tow rope in that truck?"

Ed Michaels was the best shot in town, probably one of the best marksmen in the world. He had been in the Olympics about thirty years ago. He was Waraxe's one claim to fame. But he wasn't a cowboy. He wasn't a fast draw.

Collins put all of his weight behind his left fist and landed it on the point of Michaels' jaw, just the way boys jumped onto him.

Michaels sprawled out, spread-eagled.

Then Collins wanted to take the revolver out of Ed's belt, and press it into Ed's hand, curling his fingers around the grip and over the trigger, and then he wanted to shake Ed awake, slap his face and shake him....

Collins spun around, clawed open the door to the truck cab and threw himself behind the steering wheel.

He stopped wanting to make Ed Michaels shoot him.

He flipped the ignition switch, levered the floor shift and drove away.

And he was going to drive on and on and on and on.

And on and on and on.

IV

Collins turned onto the old McHenty blacktop, his foot pressed to the floorboards. Ed Michaels didn't own a car; he would have to borrow one from somebody. That would take time. Maybe Candle would give him his hearse to use to follow the Black Rachel.

Trees, fences, barns whizzed past the windows of the cab and then the steel link-mesh fence took up, the fence surrounding the New Kansas National Spaceport. Behind it, further from town, some of the concrete had been poured and the horizon was a remote, sterile gray sweep.

The McHenty Road would soon be closed to civilian traffic. But right now the government wanted people to drive along and see that the spaceship was nothing terrible, nothing to fear.

The girl, Nancy Comstock, was alive in the back. He knew that. But he couldn't stop to prove it or to help her. Candle would make them lynch him first.

Why hadn't Candle stopped him from getting away?

He had managed to break his control for a second. He had done that before when he deflected Nancy's aim. But he couldn't resist Candle for long. Why hadn't Candle made him turn around and come back?

Candle's control of him had seemed to stop when he got inside the cab of the truck. Could it be that the metal shield of the cab could protect an Earthling from the strange mental powers of the creature from another planet which was inhabiting the body of Doc Candle?

Collins shook his head.

More likely Candle was doing this just to get his hopes up. He probably would seize control of him any time he wanted to. But Collins decided to go on playing it as if he did have some hope, as if a shield of metal could protect him from Candle's control. Otherwise ... there was no otherwise.

Collins suddenly saw an opening.

The steel mesh fence was ruptured by a huge semitrailer truck turned on its side. Twenty feet of fence on either side was down. This was restricted

government property, but of course spaceships were hardly prime military secrets any longer. Repairs in the fence had not been made instantaneously, and the wreckage was not guarded.

Collins swerved the wheel and drove the old wagon across the waffle-plate obstruction, onto the smooth tarmac beyond.

He raced, raced, raced through the falling night, not sure where he was headed.

Up above he saw the shelter of shadows from a cluster of half-finished buildings. He drove into them and parked.

Collins sat still for a moment, then threw open the door and ran around to the back of the truck, jerking open the handles.

Nancy fell out into his arms.

"What kind of ambulance is this?" she demanded. "It doesn't look like an ambulance. It doesn't smell like an ambulance. It looks like – looks like –"

Collins said, "Shut up. Get out of there. We've got to hide."

"Why?"

"They think I murdered you."

"Murdered me? But I'm alive. Can't they see I'm alive?"

Collins shook his head. "I doubt it. I don't know why, but I don't think it would be that simple. Come with me."

The blood on her breast had dried, and he could see it was only a shallow groove dug by the bullet. But she flinched in pain as she began to walk, pulling the muscles.

They stopped and leaned against a half-finished metallic shed.

"Where are we? Where are you taking me?"

"This is the spaceport. Now shut up."

"Let me go."

"No."

"I'm not dead," Nancy insisted. "You know I'm not dead. I won't press charges against you — just let me go free."

"I told you it wasn't that simple. He wants them to think you're dead, and that's what they'll think."

Nancy passed fingers across her eyes. "Who? Who are you talking about?"

"Doc Candle. He won't let them know you're alive."

Nancy rubbed her forehead with both hands. "Sam, you don't know what you're doing. You don't—know what you're getting yourself into. Just let me show myself to someone. They'll know I'm not dead. Really they will."

"Okay," he said. "Let's find somebody."

He led her toward a more nearly completed building, showing rectangles of light. They looked through the windows to see several men in uniforms bending over blueprints on a desk jury-rigged of sawhorses and planks.

"Sam," Nancy said, "one of those men is Terry Elston. He's a Waraxe boy. I went to school with him. He'll know me. Let's go in...."

"No," Collins said. "We don't go in."

"But — " Nancy started to protest, but stopped. "Wait. He's coming out."

Collins slid along the wall and stood behind the door. "Tell him who you are when he comes out. I'll stay here."

They waited. After a few seconds, the door opened.

Nancy stepped into the rectangle of light thrown on the concrete from the window.

"Terry," she said. "Terry, it's me — Nancy Comstock."

The blue-jawed young man in uniform frowned. "Who did you say you were? Have you got clearance from this area?"

"It's me, Terry. Nancy. Nancy Comstock."

Terry Elston stepped front and center. "That's not a very good joke. I knew Nancy. Hell of a way to die, killed by some maniac."

"Terry, I'm Nancy. Don't you recognize me?"

Elston squinted. "You look familiar. You look a little like Nancy. But you can't be her, because she's dead."

"I'm here, and I tell you I'm not dead."

"Nancy's dead," Elston repeated mechanically. "Say, what are you trying to pull?"

"Terry, behind you. A maniac!"

"Sure," Elston said. "Sure. There's a maniac behind me."

Collins stepped forward and hit Elston behind the ear. He fell silently.

Nancy stared down at him.

"He refused to recognize me. He acted like I was crazy, pretending to be Nancy Comstock."

"Come on along," Collins urged. "They'll probably shoot us on sight as trespassers."

She looked around herself without comprehension.

"Which way?"

"This way."

Collins did not say those words.

They were said by the man with the gun in the uniform like the one worn by Elston. He motioned impatiently.

"This way, this way."

"No priority," Colonel Smith-Boerke said as he paced back and forth, gun in hand.

From time to time he waved it threateningly at Collins and Nancy who sat on the couch in Smith-Boerke's office. They had been sitting for close to two hours. Collins now knew the Colonel did not intend to turn him over to the authorities. They were being held for reasons of Smith-Boerke's own.

"They sneak the ship in here, plan for an unscheduled hop from an uncompleted base—the strictest security we've used in ten or fifteen

years—and now they cancel it. This is bound to get leaked by somebody! They'll call it off. It'll never fly now."

Collins sat quietly. He had been listening to this all evening. Smith-Boerke had been drinking, although it wasn't very obvious.

Smith-Boerke turned to Collins.

"I've been waiting for somebody like you. Just waiting for you to come along. And here you are, a wanted fugitive, completely in my power! Perfect, perfect."

Collins nodded to himself. Of course, Colonel Smith-Boerke had been waiting for him. And Doc Candle had driven him right to him. It was inescapable. He had been intended to escape and turn up right here all along.

"What do you want with me?"

Smith-Boerke's flushed face brightened. "You want to become a hero? A hero so big that all these trumped-up charges against you will be dropped? It'll be romantic. Back to Lindbergh-to-Paris. Tell me, Collins, how would you like to be the first man to travel faster than light?"

Collins knew there was no way out.

"All right," he said.

Smith-Boerke wiped a hand across his dry mouth.

"Project Silver has to come off. My whole career depends on it. You don't have anything to do. Everything's cybernetic. Just ride along and prove a human being can survive. Nothing to it. No hyperdrives, none of that kind of stuff. We had an engine that could go half lightspeed and now we've made it twice as efficient and more. No superstitions about Einstein, I hope? No? Good."

"I'll go," Collins said. "But what if I had said 'no'."

Smith-Boerke put the gun away in a desk drawer.

"Then you could have walked out of here, straight into the MP's."

"Why didn't they come in here after me?"

"They don't have security clearance for this building."

"Don't leave me alone," Nancy said urgently. "I don't understand what's happening. I feel so helpless. I need help."

"You're asking the wrong man," Collins said briefly.

Collins felt safe when the airlock kissed shut its metal lips.

It was not like the house, but yet he felt safe, surrounded by all the complicated, expensive electronic equipment. It was big, solid, sterilely gleaming.

Another thing—he had reason to believe that Doc Candle's power could not reach him through metal.

"But I'm not outside," Doc Candle said, "I'm in here, with you."

Collins yelled and cursed, he tried to pull off the acceleration webbing and claw through the airlock. Nobody paid any attention to him. Count downs had been automated. Smith-Boerke was handling this one himself, and he cut off the Audio-In switch from the spaceship. Doc Candle said nothing else for a moment, and the spaceship, almost an entity itself, went on with its work.

The faster-than-light spaceship took off.

At first it was like any other rocket takeoff.

The glow of its exhaust spread over the field of the spaceport, then over the hills and valleys, and then the town of Waraxe, spreading illumination even as far as Sam Collins' silent house.

After a time of being sick, Collins lay back and accepted this too.

"That's right, that's it," Doc Candle said. "Take it and die with it. That's the ticket."

Collins' eyes settled on a gauge. Three quarters lightspeed. Climbing.

Nothing strange, nothing untoward happened when you reached lightspeed. It was only an arbitrary number. All else was superstition. Forget it, forget it, forget it.

Something was telling him that. At first he thought it was Doc Candle but then he knew it was the ship.

Collins sat back and took it, and what he was taking was death. It was creeping over him, seeping into his feet, filling him like liquid does a sponge.

Not will, but curiosity, caused him to turn his head.

He saw Doc Candle.

The old body was dying. He was in the emergency seat, broken, a ribbon of blood lacing his chin. But Doc Candle continued to laugh triumphantly in Collins' head.

"Why? Why do you have to kill me?" Collins asked.

"Because I am evil."

"How do you know you're evil?"

"They told me so!" Candle shouted back in the thundering silence of Death's approach. "They were always saying I was bad."

They.

Collins got a picture of something incredibly old and incredibly wise, but long unused to the young, clumsy gods. Something that could mar the molding of a godling and make it mortal.

"But I'm not really so very bad," Doc Candle went on. "I had to destroy, but I picked someone who really didn't care if he were destroyed or not. An almost absolutely passive human being, Sam. You."

Collins nodded.

"And even then," said the superhuman alien from outer space, "I could not just destroy. I have created a work of art."

"Work of art?"

"Yes. I have taken your life and turned it into a horror story, Sam! A chilling, demonic, black-hearted horror!"

Collins nodded again.

LIGHTSPEED.

There was finally something human within Sam Collins that he could not deny. He wanted to live. It wasn't true. He did care what happened.

You do? said somebody.

He does? asked somebody else, surprised, and suddenly he again got the image of wiser, older creatures, a little ashamed because of what they had done to the creature named Doc Candle.

He does, chorused several voices, and Sam Collins cried aloud: "I do! I want to live!" They were just touching lightspeed; he felt it.

This time it was not just a biological response. He really wanted help. He wanted to stay alive.

From the older, wiser voices he got help, though he never knew how; he felt the ship move slipwise under him, and then a crash.

And Doc Candle got help too, the only help even the older, wiser ones could give him.

They pulled him out of the combined wreckage of the spaceship and his house. Both were demolished.

It was strange how the spaceship Sam Collins was on crashed right into his house. Ed Michaels recalled a time in a tornado when Sy Baxter's car was picked up, lifted across town and dropped into his living room.

When the men from the spaceport lifted away tons of rubble, they found him and said, "He's dead."

No, I'm not, Collins thought. I'm alive.

And then they saw that he really was alive, that he had come through it alive somehow, and nobody remembered anything like it since the airliner crash in '59.

A while later, after they found Doc Candle's body and court-martialed Smith-Boerke, who took drugs, Nancy was nuzzling him on his hospital bed. It was nice, but he wasn't paying much attention.

I'm free, Collins thought as the girl hugged him. Free! He kissed her.

Well, he thought while she was kissing him back, as free as I want to be, anyway.

The End