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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and

Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

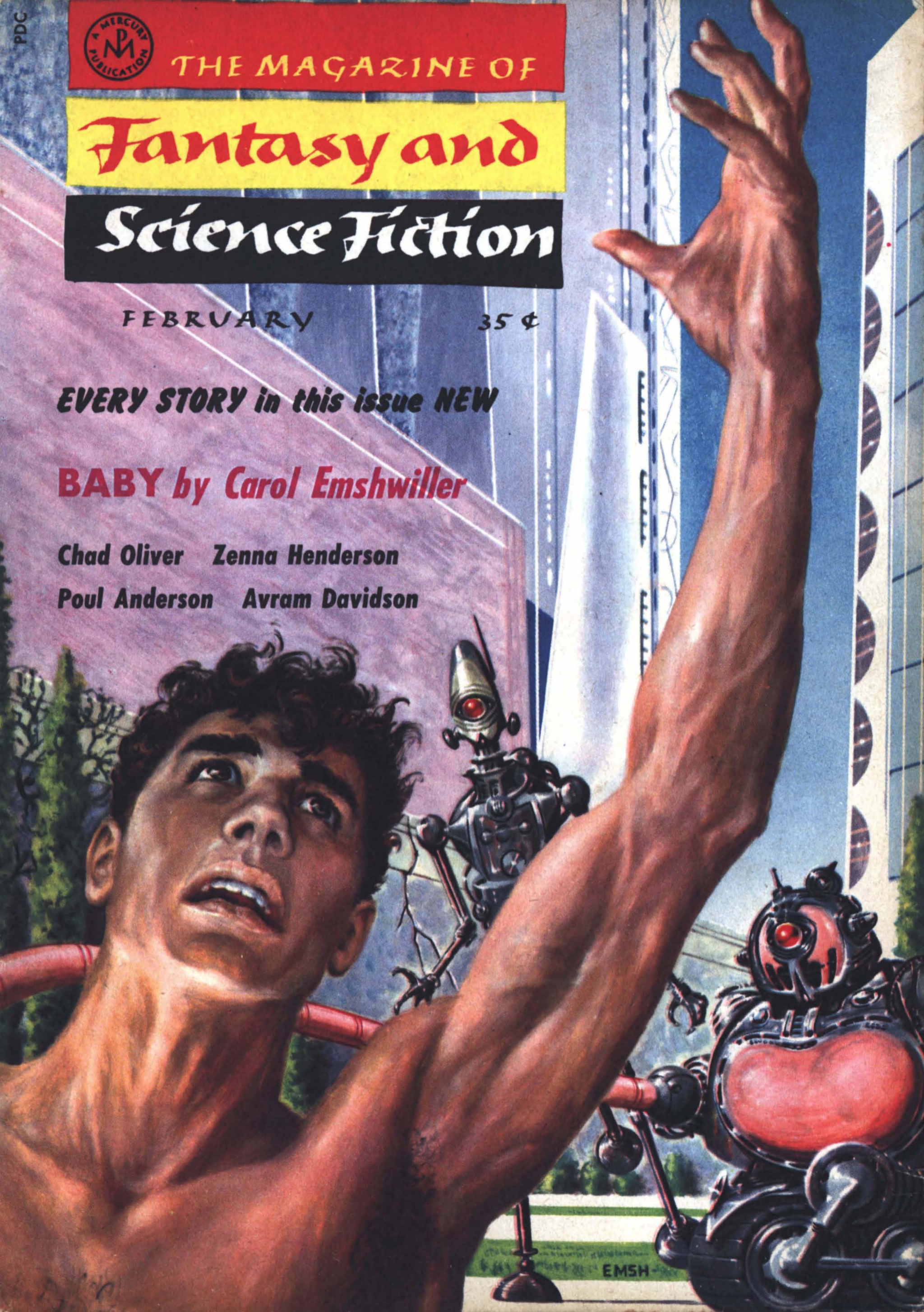
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EVERY STORY in this issue NEW

BABY by Carol Emshwiller

Chad Oliver Zenna Henderson

Poul Anderson Avram Davidson



EMSH

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 14, No. 2

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COVER PAINTING BY EMSH

(*illustrating "Baby"*)

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 14, No. 2, Whole No. 81, FEBRUARY, 1958. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and Possessions, Canada and the Pan-American Union; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 527 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. © 1957 by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Despite the differing lengths of their by-lines, old pro Ed Emsb and new pro Carol Emswiller are husband and wife. Up until now, their professional careers have followed separate courses; but when Mrs. E. wrote a story of particular visual appeal, Mr. E. seemed the obvious artist from whom to commission a cover. It's a fitting coincidence that this object of marital collaboration should be called

Baby

by CAROL EMSHWILLER

THEY CALLED HIM BABY. HE WAS six feet tall, lean, and had the look of a hungry hunting animal, but the robots called him Baby.

Someone had once written in a neat script in a tome and on a white paper the carefully chosen name, Christopher John Correy, but there was no one left who could say that this particular name on this particular paper and in this particular book was the name of the man called Baby by robots.

Until a few years ago the city had had all the food it takes to make a man full grown and to keep him sleek and healthy, but now Baby's hip bones jutted forward from a concave stomach, his ribs arched above, and the strong muscles lay just beneath the skin and showed in lined bunches when he moved.

He stood naked in the dining

room, damp bare feet on the smooth black tile. He shut his eyes tight and said in a whisper, "Please, please and please, be meat." Then he swallowed the saliva that came at the thought of food. He chewed on nothing and waited, hoping, but not expecting. "I said please," he whispered.

There was no one in the room but him and he watched with fox eyes on the kitchen door until it opened and a model B maid came in. The soup plates on her tray top held only brown powder. House 76 had lost its water pipes in the last freeze of the season because the heat had gone out.

But Baby hadn't come for soup. Sometimes 76 had meat and if not meat, usually an edible desert. Baby was hungry enough for anything at all.

The model B put a soup plate in

front of each empty chair around the table, and then it waited by the kitchen door, and Baby waited, and after a time the model B took the plates away. The next course *was* meat, or had been, but something had gone wrong and the roast was burned to a dry black lump.

The Please is fooling me, Baby thought. It wants to make me angry.

The meat was impossible to eat, but the model B cut it with knife fingers, not noticing how the black flaked off and fell to the floor. It served each plate with the dark, woody chunks and also with something unrecognizable, an overcooked or spoiled vegetable or perhaps a moldy salad. Then it waited again and after a while took the untouched plates away and came in with the dessert, chocolate pie with whipped cream. A dairy still came to 76 and with milk from one of the underground farms where the robots still tended cows. And the stove had timed just right this time.

Baby glanced out the glass wall behind him. "Overseer, Rob 10, please not be there now, please." He shut his eyes and whispered it. Then he moved fast, reaching under model B's knives just before they came down to split the pie. Model B didn't even notice its knives cut nothing. It was a poor automatic thing on a track and it had no eye. The stove ran it, adjusting it for each task as it loaded the

tray. But overseer Rob was like the maid. His eye flickered red, observant, and his legs telescoped at the knees and could run faster than Baby.

Baby ran across the hall balancing the pie. The walls at the end, still working smoothly, lifted to let him out into the back yard. 76's walls were not discriminating anymore. They had opened and closed for Baby for a number of years now.

"Overseer, Rob 10, please not be there now, please."

The overseer wasn't.

Baby climbed the artificial hill at the back of the house at a crouching run, and pushed through the overgrown hedge into the neglected yard of the house that had lost its overseer six years ago. He flopped down on his stomach behind the young trees and bushes. He pushed out his lips and sucked at the whipped cream on the top of the pie, not caring about the long scratches the hedge had made across his body.

He would not have much time, here, so close to his own home, so he concentrated on eating rapidly and without relish. This was something just to fill his stomach. He was hungry now for meat or milk.

He was losing faith in Please. It didn't work as often as it used to. And he was losing faith in Nursie too, but she could still catch him when he was close to his home like this. In spite of how she was

now, her arms were still long enough, and her eye still saw. She was slower, but not too slow. She was strong, broad-bottomed with a caterpillar tread and she could still lift him. He was only really safe from her a couple of miles or so from his house. And even then it was usually only a matter of time for her to find him. Now he was behind 75 and his own home was just next door.

"Baby, Baby. Come to Nursie, you scallywag."

Baby raised his head, mouth dripping chocolate, smears on nose and cheeks. He leaned over the pie like an animal over a fresh kill, wary and challenging.

"Baby, come to Nursie. It's time for your nap. Don't make Nursie hunt all over, that's a good Baby. I've milk and cookies."

I'd take a nap for milk and cookies, Baby thought, but the glass is always empty now and the cookies, when there are any, aren't fit to eat. He bent to the pie again. His teeth scraped on the pan as he bit at the crust, tearing at it dog-like.

He couldn't get away now. She would find him and catch him, and take the pie away if he didn't finish it fast. Pies are not for little babies, she would say.

There was silence while she circled, slowly scanning, and he wolfed the last of the crust. At the half circle she caught the warmth, and with a wheeze, scratch, scratch,

wheeze, scratch, scratch, she came after him. She sounded slower than she was. Baby didn't try to get away. In a moment one of her long flexible arms reached out into the bushes and took him about the waist gently but firmly. He yielded to the pull, stood up and walked towards Nursie, leaning on her soft arm. He hadn't tried to fight her for a long time now. It had always been useless.

"There's a good boy. Here's milk and cookies, and then we'll pop into bed for a nap." She put the empty sip-glass into his hand. "Baby do it all by himself."

"There is no milk for Baby here. You never have milk for me anymore."

"Yes, it's there. I got it from the dairy box just now. The milk-robbers came, early, early, while you were still asleep, and they brought this good milk just for Baby."

A feeling came over him like getting into a warm bath only the warmth flowed inside him. For a moment he could say nothing at all, and then he said, "Where's my milk," in a whisper. His arm muscles tightened and he clenched his fists against his stomach.

There was something wrong with him lately, and it was getting worse. Something that knawed at him and knotted his stomach like this. A great need, overpowering, for an unknown thing. It drove him to far wanderings about the city, to taking stupid risks, to fits of

running after nothing in the empty streets, to staring at the sky, sometimes to a wild howling, and to climbing, climbing dizzily and trembling on narrow perches about the high buildings.

"Where's my milk?" He screamed it this time. "Ask Rob 6 if there is milk there." The overseer will tell her and *then* she will doubt. She will no longer believe in Please nor in Central, and because she is so sure, her doubt will be devastating. He would see her fall on the ground and scream with horror of her lost belief.

"Come, drink it up," she said.

"Central is stopped! There is no Please!" he shouted.

Both soft mother-arms came out to embrace him. There was a place, a specially built place at her breast (or what stood for breast) to cradle a baby or pillow a young head, but it was too low for him now even when he knelt. Still, she pulled him to her.

"Don't worry, Baby. Don't cry. There's always milk for Baby. As much as you want. Come along and we'll get some more."

"There isn't any milk." He was calm suddenly. "Please ask Rob 6. I said, please. Now ask Rob 6, please."

"Such a good, polite boy. All right, we'll ask Rob 6 if you want. Yes. You said please, didn't you. Yes you did."

There was a time a long time ago when Baby always answered

eagerly and proudly, "Yes, I did, didn't I," but now he said nothing, his face as expressionless as Nursie's flat tray of features always was.

She took his strong hand, calloused from climbing, and led him across his own neat lawn to his home. The front wall panel rose to let them in as they neared.

Nursie stopped just inside, and Baby knew she was scanning for Rob 6. Maybe she was even talking to him in the silent way they had that Baby could never hear. A long time ago he had felt for the first time the fierce frustration of not hearing. Even though the discovery of it had come gradually, the understanding came all at once. It was as if he "knew" they were doing it long before he "realized" it. That day a feeling like the one he had now had washed over him in a hot flush. They're hard and hurt-proof, and I'm soft; they're strong with long changeable arms, and I'm weak and only one shape; and now they talk together and I can't hear it. My Nursie talks silently to that Rob 6.

That day of realization he had gone down to the high buildings where the statue was, tall to the third window of one of them, and he had climbed all the way to the top of the white head for the first time. He scraped his thumb on the way up. He remembered the blood smearing the fleshy part of his hand, and the drops making three red lines down his arm.

At the top he had shouted, "I wish to be Rob 6." He sat right on the big head with a foot on each ear, drunk with height. "I don't want to be Baby anymore. I must be more than I am. Please, please, please, and please. Baby said please."

He had looked at the hot summer sun and shouted, "I say please twice to the sun in the sky," and then he turned towards Central, "and four times to Central." He liked the sun best, but he knew Central was more powerful. He smeared the blood from his hand across the white statue head and shut his eyes tight. I am getting hard and strong, he thought. I have one eye here in the center and it flickers red. He could feel his two eyes merging slowly to just above his nose. My arms are interchangeable, and if I jump I will land on rubber feet and my knees will spring, one section up into the other, and I won't be hurt. I am Rob number one thousand and twenty-six. I am changed.

And he had jumped then.

It took Nursie almost a whole day to find him. "You naughty boy. You naughty, naughty boy, to go so far from home." She carried him back gently and called the Rob-Doc, and Baby had lain in bed a long time after that. She had been happy with him for being a good boy all that time, but he had cried each night with pain and frustration, and he had wondered,

since he couldn't be Rob 6, when he would be at least a man, whatever that was. Nursie always just said, sometime.

And now he would try to hurt her as he had hurt then, inside, and as he hurt now with an unknown need.

She started off, after the few seconds' wait at the door, pulling Baby along after her. Her broad caterpillar tread easily mounted the stone steps behind the huge carefully rustic fireplace. She crossed, in rubbery silence, the metal-tiled hallway while Baby pad-padded behind her, leaving dirty damp outlines of his feet on the spotless floor. They crossed the kitchen by the center ramp and entered the door to the brain center of house 74.

The room was large and filled with wires and pipes and conveyer belts, but the main control unit was small. The thing that ran everything in the house including this maze of crisscrossing wires and pipes, was bread-box size. Rob 6 stood before it, propped back on his third leg, the one he used for balance when walking and as a prop when standing still. He wore his mechanic hands and had plugged himself into one side of the control unit by a long flexible thumb.

"There is something wrong," Rob 6 said, "but it is not here. Control is fine."

"Baby says there is no milk," Nursie said, "but I heard the milk-

robs come this morning. Baby is fooling Nursie again. He fools and fools. And, Rob 6, Baby is getting so big. *Such* a big boy. Too big for Nursie. Or do I need to be fixed too? Will you check, Robby 6?"

"You are thirty-eight years old. You should have been replaced."

"We make do with what we have. Yes we do." She chanted it as if she were reciting a nursery rhyme. "But *now*, Robby 6, *is* there milk in the dairy box for Baby?"

"I doubt it."

"I don't understand. I don't understand at all. There is *always* milk in the dairy box at seven twenty-three."

"Things are not going right and they are getting worse. There is something wrong with 74 now, but Control is fine. Library did not send a tape with motor repair information. I dialed and none came. And I asked and Central did not answer."

"That's too bad, *too* bad," Nursie chanted, and then she said, "But if at first you don't succeed, try, try again," and, "Things will be better tomorrow."

"Not without human beings."

"They'll come back. Mommy and Daddy will come back *later*."

"Nurse 16, you helped to bury them yourself after the enemy seeded the sickness."

"Why Rob 6! And in front of Baby too! He understands things now, you know."

Baby squatted down, flat-footed, on the metal-grilled floor of the control room. Rob 6 and Nursie never used chairs and neither did he since he'd outgrown his highchair. "He's only said it a thousand times already," he muttered, sullen faced, carefully not looking at them.

It wasn't going to happen now either, nor ever. No matter what he said or did, Nursie would be the same. She would never know anything she didn't already know now. Her eye looks at me, but she doesn't really see me at all, he thought. If I were gone or even stopped like some of the robots, she would say only, "He's coming back *later*," like she says over and over about Mommy and Daddy and Jeannie. She sees my shape, but not me. I am a nothing thing to her, but *she* is less than that even.

"Baby was inside Nursie then," Nursie said. "That was a long time ago and you were just a little scallywag."

"You're just a nothing," Baby said.

"Hush, dear. That's not very polite. You know, I kept you inside me a whole extra year like your Mommy and Daddy said and when you came out you were just as safe as can be, and now you're growing up to be a little gentleman just like Mommy and Daddy wanted you to be."

Baby breathed out loudly and hunched lower over his knees. She will *not* change and she will *never*

see me. "You're both just nothings," he said, "and there is no Central and no Please at all."

"What a thing to say," Nursie said.

"Ask, then—ask Central and Library. Ask *them* why there is no milk anymore."

Rob 6 and Nursie stood silent. They're asking, Baby thought, feeling an unbearable irritation. Rob 6, even, is asking Central and he knows it doesn't answer.

"Central doesn't answer," Rob 6 said.

Suddenly Baby found it difficult to breath. Squatting over his knees was too cramping and he stood up. "Central *never* answers anymore." His voice sounded different to him, low and tense. "Yesterday and yesterday and yesterday before that, a long time before even, it didn't answer, but you keep asking and asking."

"It is right to ask Central first," Rob 6 said.

"Of course it is," Nursie said. "You know that, yes you do. Always ask Central *first*. It will tell you what to do *next*."

He began to tremble and he felt a hot knot swell in his stomach. Part of him seemed to stand apart and ask, what's wrong lately? Rob 6 and Nursie are not so different than they used to be.

He remembered a time when they had seemed enough in every way, observant enough, intelligent enough, loving enough, but that

was a long time ago, and he had changed somehow and he was changing even more. Now he was full of unreasonable, uncontrollable angry feelings.

He kept his eyes carefully off Nursie. He felt he would burst if he looked at her empty, wide eye. "Rob 6," he spoke slowly, "Central will never answer . . . *never answer* anymore. What are you going to do about it?"

Rob 6 stood silent. Is he asking again, Baby wondered? Is he asking Central what will he do now that Central is out?

Suddenly it was too much. The swelling hot knot inside him burst and he was shouting. "This is the end of it. I will not listen to any one of you anymore. You don't understand anything. You have no eyes and no ears that are anymore good than stopped ones."

"Let's not have a tantrum now," Nursie said, interrupting him. "Why Baby needs his nap. My goodness, no wonder. It's way past the time." She reached out to him.

Fighting wouldn't do any good. He could never hurt her, never dent her, in her mind nor in her body. He was still nothing to her even when he fought, but now he fought. He bit at the soft arms and kicked at her treads, bruising his feet, and he began to laugh an odd, sobbing laugh. The fighting was silly and the laughter shook him so that it was only weak fighting anyway. "You can't even see me.

You never have. Never, never."

She was carrying him slowly, but easily, up the wide low stairway, and she was talking, gently soothing. "You must learn to be a *good* boy, and not fight. You know, there's an enemy, a barbarous enemy, far away, and we, the robots, protect the city for all the peace-loving peoples of the world, for this city is more than just a place for people to live and work. It stands for a way of life. It is a haven of civilized living and we must keep it safe."

He'd heard all this before.

Tall wide-leaved plants, rooted at the foot of the stairs, brushed at them as they rose. Baby tore off a whole branch with one violent sweep of his arm.

"No, no," Nursie said. "Mustn't touch." This made Baby laugh louder and more, though he didn't know why, and the laughing hurt his stomach, but he couldn't stop.

They crossed the balcony, Nursie swaying a little with Baby's tossing weight. The door of the nursery slid open as it always did instantly for Nursie, but never for anyone else, not even Baby, though it would have opened for Mommy and Daddy.

They were there, in his bright special room, circular, windowed top to bottom, with a blue ceiling where stars winked on and off. A room specially planned by a loving mother and father for a son named Christopher John.

Nursie put him gently into his bed and shut the gate. "You'll feel much better after your nap," she said. "*Then* you'll be my good boy again and we'll play in the sandpile at the park if you like."

Baby doubled up with painful laughter. Why was everything so funny now?

She left and the gay red door slid shut after her, shut to stay, until she came back.

The bed was youth-size. Baby lay, knees drawn up, laughing and holding his stomach. Gradually the laughter stopped and it was like after crying, leaving him empty and looking at his starred ceiling.

Later he put his feet tight against the bottom of the bed and braced his hands at the top. "This is not even my bed," he said out loud. "It's too small." And he pushed until the wood panel broke and his feet came through and he lay out straight. "I'm me," he said. "They can't see me, but I am me, and quite big."

He got up and stepped over the side of the bed. He went to the section of the wall with movable panels. He had broken the levers long before, on that moonlight night of the first escape when he was half the size he was now. House had not registered it even then so no one came to fix it. He slid the glass panel to the side, letting the hot outside air come in. He grinned again, pulling his lips back from his teeth, a dog grin, or wolf.

He stepped out on the thin wire frame that held the patio roof. "Please," he said, but there was a downturn of his voice, half mockery, yet not quite sure. He ran out on the frame, tightrope style, sure-footed, jumped at the end and landed rolling in the grass beyond the gray-and-orange circle of the patio. There was no one in sight.

"Good Please?" He loped across the back, leaped the dried-up stony bed where the imitation stream used to run, pumped in a rambling circle about the back yard. He climbed the carefully random rocks at the far end and jumped a retaining wall to the footwalk below.

The sub-belt entrance, a stone lean-to at the corner park, was a 200-yard sprint. Baby ran down the slow-moving ramp into the bright white-tiled tunnel and at the bottom stepped easily from the slower belts to the fastest. But even there he kept running along the moving aisle past the line of seats.

This was not a time for sitting. Now he was going farther and faster than ever before, and never coming back. He went at an easy run, hands low, relaxed, head tipped back. He looked ahead down the long bright tunnel, empty and bare as far as he could see—but then everywhere he had ever looked had been empty and bare except for occasional robots.

He ran until, even in this cool place, the sweat dripped down from under his arms. He felt the damp-

ness between his shoulder blades and on his upper lip and he smelled himself, a sticky, unrobot smell, bitter and sweet. After a while he tired and sprawled, knees spread wide, in one of the hard molded chairs at the side.

A long time had passed, he knew. Usually he was impatient with the sub-belt. He had never been able to stay underground more than about an hour without coming up to take a look, but this time he had the patience to stay. The running had eased the turmoil but something still smoldered inside him and now he had a new kind of patience.

He lay back, eyes half shut, not moving, hypnotized by the long white way before him and the humming movement. Hours were nothing to him now.

It was hunger, finally, that woke him to reality again, but still he didn't go up outside. He began a series of belt-changings, branching off at random but staying on the fast lanes. His stomach growled and he knew that even leaving the belts was no insurance of a meal. He would have to hunt and sneak and hide from overseers or wild dogs. But if this was to be forever, a change for keeps, it had to be far and devious, and so he stayed.

Much later he took the slower lanes to the slowest and then to a rising ramp.

He came out on a wide-walled footwalk. The summer sun was low

and red, and Baby stood, watching it. He could almost see it move past the tree tops. He whispered nothing, but he felt the feeling he used to feel when he said Please and it was important, the same feeling when Rob 6 asked Central and Central used to answer and was always right.

He stared at the sun, thinking, this will be the place, Sun. Here I will be me and robots will not tell me what to do and I won't belong to any house or any overseer.

He walked across the grassy tree-lined footwalk to the smooth gray wall. It was half again as tall as he was and had not the slightest hand hold. Baby bent his knees low, jumped from a stand, and grasped the top with both hands. He swung his left foot up, curled the toes over the top and then pulled himself up. Resting on elbows and one knee, he looked down into the garden, a richer, larger garden than he had ever seen before. He felt an exhilarating excitement for this looked like something really new and different.

He rolled gently over the wall and landed on hands and knees in the grass. He stood up and walked boldly down the neatly kept path that led away from the wall. He didn't hide or watch for overseers. Whatever would happen, he felt, would be different here in this different place, and he went eagerly forward to meet whatever would come.

He passed rows of thick hedges, then a group of tall, pungent-smelling pinetrees. He rounded a bank of white-flowered bushes and there, before him, surrounded by cut hedges like the walls of a room, was a fountain and a statue.

The pool was edged with natural-looking rocks and on the largest rock in the center was a figure of stone about his own size.

Baby laughed out loud then, splashed through the clear cold water and climbed up the slippery rock to stand just below the figure. He had seen others, oddly shaped like this, in parks and downtown sections sometimes: the rounded body, looking strangely lumpy top and bottom, with a thin waist in the center. He knew the names that went with this shape were woman, girl and lady.

This figure held the head of a serpent. The long snake body crossed the waist just under one of the pointed chest-lumps. The snake's mouth was wide, and inside there was the tiny pipe where the water of the fountain came flowing.

Baby stooped and drank from the serpent's mouth, and then looked up and it seemed as if the statue's bent head and half-closed eyes looked at him with a steady gaze, and there was something there that was not like a robot. Something that made him sad.

He reached up and ran his fingers down the soft curve of the

cheek, so soft-looking but so hard to the touch. He touched the nose and then his own nose. This is a little baby too, he thought, smaller than I am. He went round to the back. He laughed because the hair hung down so far from the head. He ran his hand from under the arm, inward to the waist and down over the hips and he laughed again because his own shape was right and this shape was a joke.

Then he remembered how hot it was and how cool the water below felt on his legs. It was a shallow pool. The water came only just above his knees, but he climbed down and lay full length in it, splashing and blowing and putting his head in all the way.

He sat up, wiping the water from his face with the palms of his hands, and there, in the path before him, it seemed as if the statue had come to life, colored a rosy tan. It was all there, but different from the stone: damply curling tan-brown hair, the darker etched eyebrows, tan-brown eyes, lips lightly red and also the tips of the two round shapes at the chest.

Soft, it was, but it stood like the statue, and he, half rising on one knee, stood like a statue too. He stared a long time, not moving, afraid almost to breath even, and the other stared back. Then he stood up slowly, so slowly, as if a strange mad dog or wild cat was before him. The only sound was the water dripping from his body, but that

lasted only a few moments and again they stood and stared. Then Baby moved again, stepping slowly forward this time. He was not afraid. This creature was smaller than he was and looked so vulnerable.

The creature took a step back then, and Baby took a faster step forward. Then the thing turned and ran, but Baby caught it easily in two leaps and they fell together, one warm soft body against another. This contact shocked them. They drew apart quickly, stilled again like statues, and they stared silently. Then slowly Baby touched a finger to the creature's chest. The wonder of the feel made him draw his hand away again, but slowly this time. "Soft," he said in a whisper, "Soft and warm," and then he touched his own chest. "I too."

The other stared silently a moment and then asked suddenly, also in a whisper, "Are you . . . human?"

Baby grasped the creature's upper arm then, shaking it boldly but lightly back and forth. "You feel good," he said. "Strange, but good."

"I'm human," it said then.

"So am I. I'm Baby."

"I'm Honey."

"I came to find a new thing and I found you."

"They all say there are no humans left."

"Rob 6 and Nursie are wrong and so are all the others, and now there's you. I'm glad I ran away

from them and came here. Why is your hair so long?"

"It just is."

"And you're shaped all wrong."

"It's you that's wrong. This is the way I am. Like the statue is the way to be and that's my way."

"I know. You're woman. You look funny, but you feel nice." He cupped the other's chin in his palm. He ran his fingers over the lips and then down across the neck and lower even, to the pink, soft tip of the round shape at the chest. She drew away. "You tickle," she said.

"I like human beings," Baby said, "better than Nursie or Rob 6 or dogs and cats. I didn't think I would, but I do."

"I think I do too."

They both stiffened at the sound of a distant voice. "Honey, Honey. Where are you? It's almost time for bed."

They stared at each other but they didn't move to go.

The Nursie came nearer. Baby could hear the wheeze and scratch. When she rounded the corner, finally, she looked exactly like his own Nursie, but he could tell, absolutely, it wasn't Nurse 16.

She reached quickly and drew Honey away from him. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "This is private property."

Without thinking, Baby gave the information he always gave, the way Nursie had taught him. "I'm Baby number 2, family PR 1-54-238, overseer Rob 1026. I live in

Forest Knolls, and I came here and found this human being."

"How did you get in?"

"I climbed the wall."

"Those wall guards, they just don't work anymore." She stood motionless and Baby knew she was calling some other rob. He looked at the human being again, fascinated with the curiously shaped body, drawn by its softness and vulnerability, and he waited, staring at it, and it stared too, back at him. He could see its eyes move, tracing the contours of his body. In a few minutes the overseer came.

"Trespasser," the Nursie said. "Male too. I do hope nothing happened. 2, PR 1-54-238, 0-1026. And we must do something about the wall guards. Poor Honey must be protected from this sort of thing."

The robot made a quick examination. "Nothing happened," he said. "There's been no trespasser for eighteen years and four months now." He took Baby firmly, rounding each wrist with an all-purpose pincer hand and led him away.

Baby went quietly, too dazed to think. He kept his head turned back, watching the creature called Honey until they rounded a corner.

The robot took him to a rambling house, all glass and vines and stone. The wall lifted on a small corner room. The overseer pushed Baby in and the wall came down again. There was a white marble table, and large plants growing beside it from a dirt section in the

floor, and there were three long low green lounge chairs. Baby lay back in one. He was filled with silent wonder. Eyes wide, he watched the twilight fade outside, lights come in other parts of the house, and curtains close.

Later the overseer brought cold unsour milk and a plate with the meat cooked just right. Baby ate and drank squatting on the floor beside the low table, spilling gravy across it as he lifted the meat in his hands. It was the best meal he'd had in a long time, but now he didn't notice the taste or care about it.

After he ate he walked about the room like a caged animal. The lights went out in the other parts of the house. Baby pounded his fists against the glass walls and gave a shout, but the walls of the little room held the sound in tight, he knew, and he gave only one call.

He stood, nose against the glass, and after a while, in the dark, the creature came and the wall lifted for it and slid shut after it.

Baby's impatience left the moment it came in.

He touched its hand, but he did not speak and neither did the creature. Softness, warmth . . . there was something here that was the answer to everything.

What was the answer?

He pulled at the creature roughly then, and it sucked in its breath and pulled away, and he let go. What *was* the answer? It was tantalizing, close, and yet . . .

He touched the creature's hair gently, and it didn't move away this time. He felt full of gentleness and of violence too, and he held himself tight, tensing his muscles against themselves.

They sat down together on the edge of one of the lounge chairs. They touched each other and they watched each other smile in the dim light of the rising half moon.

The answer was close . . . closer . . . and yet so far. Not to know and to be so close was worse than the howling and the running in moonlit streets. Much worse.

He grabbed the other, shaking it, squeezing the answer out with all his violent pent-up strength. Answer! But it only cried out in pain and then made a sobbing sound. And when he loosed his grip a bit because of the sounds it made, it pulled away and the panel was open and shut again before he realized it and the creature was gone.

When Rob 6 came in the early morning to take the lost boy home, the marble table was broken, the plants were trampled. The foam from inside the three lounges was strewn about the room. Baby had a scratch across his cheek, black-and-blue marks on his legs, and bloody knuckles, but he went quietly, wrist cuffed in Rob 6's two metal fingers.

At home Nursie bathed him and put him in his room. "I wish you would try to be good," she said. "I wish you would just try."

He slept heavily for a short while, then climbed out the window and took the same sub-belt.

He tried to remember the time it took, and the changes. Once he came out at an edge of the great city where the towers of the barrier wall stretched giant pointing fingers that sent invisible currents arcing across the city to protect it from an enemy that never came anymore.

At night he took the belt that led home to Forest Knolls. His eyes

were slits now, his mouth a firm line. There would be no more fits of running in the empty streets, or wild howling, or climbing. Instead, this crease between the eyes.

He searched the next day, and the next, and the next . . .

The important thing, the answer to everything, was somewhere there in the vast, decaying city, an answer to the robots and to the decay, to the city and the world and most of all to him, but it was . . . *lost.*

