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*Here is a story that makes its own point too sharply (and subtly) for us to hint at that point in an introduction. Let's just say that this is a sensitive tale of the Enlightened Future's attempt to solve a problem of today and all our yesterdays.*

# *Command Performance*

*by KAY ROGERS*

BIX AND HIS MOTHER had to wait while Landlord got the recorded messages from the phone. That was all right; Landlord was nice about it.

"Expecting an important call," he explained. But when he went to his desk and reached for a lease form, he looked up sharply.

"I kind of forgot," he said. "You're the new folks from Relocation. Guess I gotta use the new type form for you people."

What did he mean by that? Was that the kind of thing you ought to get on the recorder? Bix saw his mother smile nervously. Neither of them *knew* how the P.T. law worked, nor what to expect when you were relocated and assigned to a Housing Unit.

Bix glared at Landlord. Landlord, ponderously unaware, stretched down to the bottom drawer of his desk. When he straightened, a wave of rich color washed the thick bulge over his collar. It might be from the bending, but maybe he was trying to get away with something and not sure he'd make it.

"I got on my minicam and recorder," Bix said. He held up his wrist. "Did you know Relocation issues it free, Mom?"

It was much too loud and defiant for the tiny office. Mom, who always took things easier than Bix did, breathed his name reprovingly and Landlord looked up again.

"You got no call to wear it around here, son," he said mildly. "No one else does. We're law abiding folks. And we ain't got money to throw away on fines. Now, ma'am, you sign here and here."

He blotted the signatures, folded the leases. Handing one to Mom, he smiled at Bix. It was shopworn, used on many tenants; suddenly, Bix felt good. Everything was going to be swell; he was sure of it.

"Boy about fourteen in Unit Green," Landlord said. "You got Blue,

right next door. You two should hit it off." He leaned back in his chair. "Bet there's lots of things a boy like you ain't seen, living in Relocation all the while."

"Yeah, I guess so," Bix said regretfully. He was the only guy he'd ever heard of who'd never seen the Moon Rocket take off — imagine that in 1990 when you could reach Mars from the Moon Station! "The Moon Port isn't far from here, is it? Jeeps, I'd like to see the Rocket take off!"

"It ain't far," Landlord said. He smiled indulgently. "The Clays, the folks in Green, got a married daughter down there. They visit quite often. Wouldn't surprise me they asked you along, you and young Sam get to be friends." He stood up. "Well, ma'am, I think you'll like it here."

"I'm sure we will," Bix's mother said warmly.

She fooled Bix too; he was so used to her believing things were the way they looked. So later, when they were getting settled in Unit Blue with its clean, shining plastic walls, she surprised him by insisting:

"I don't care what he said, Bix. I want you to wear that thing. I don't think anyone will say or do anything, there's the law, but —"

"But what, Mom?" Bix said, puzzled.

"The law forbids discrimination in word and deed," she said, half quoting. "But things like that take time. Education would be better, it seems to me. So don't expect too much."

Bix wished she wouldn't worry so. He set his battered little radio on the bedside table. Watching him, Mom smiled suddenly.

"We can get a visio now, dear."

That would be swell. Only a thing like the takeoff, Bix wanted to be there, on the spot. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "What did you mean, don't expect too much?"

Jeeps, they'd waited years in Relocation while the P.T. was dreamed up and put to work; while the Decentralization Program got going and started resettling everybody —

"Gee, Mom," he said slowly. "If anyone says or does anything you know I can get it on my cam-rec and take it to the Control. And I'll get part of the fine for reporting it."

"It works both ways, remember," she warned. "And you be absolutely sure, Bix, before you record anything. The law wasn't meant to be abused."

Bix felt relief. She was just worried in general, there was nothing definite.

"Everything's gonna be swell," he said, confident again.

It seemed he must be right. His mother relaxed, she began to hum the old melodies about the house, her trips to Food Center took longer as she stopped to chat. But she still insisted Bix wear his cam-rec. So he had it on, the third morning, when he met Sam Clay.

Bix saw him first from the bedroom window. Sam, gangling, sandy-haired, moved slowly over the huge circle of the Unit lawn on which all the homes faced, kicking and peering at the grass.

There was a Moon flight next week; Bix had been hoping he'd meet Sam. But it wasn't solely that which made him open the window.

"Lose something?" he called with genuine friendliness.

Sam looked up. "Aw, an old . . ." His glance fulled on Bix; just for a moment, he froze, his mouth open. "Lost m'watch," he mumbled finally and went on kicking through the short grass.

When Bix went out after breakfast, he was still there, fooling around with an anti-grav belt. Turning slow somersaults six feet above the ground. Bix watched enviously. Mom had set her foot down. "They're too new to be safe," she'd told Bix.

"Find your watch?" he asked Sam. Jeeps, he'd like to try that belt!

Sam hung horizontal and inspected Bix slowly. "Oh, sure." He blinked. Twice. "You look funny — hey, you got a cam-rec!" He snickered. "Heck, guy, you don't need 'em around here, you know it? But you still look funny to me!" That annoying double blink! "Upside down, that is."

Then he smiled at Bix. "So you're the new family in Blue! I'll have to tell Ma when she gets home."

"My name's Bix." But Sam spun into a somersault, didn't see his extended hand.

"I'm Sam Clay. I s'pose you're from Relocation."

"Yeah. I was even born there — what's so funny about that?"

"Nothin'. Anybody can be born anywhere, I reckon. I just thought . . ."

"Say, you ever see the Moon Rocket take off?"

"Everybody has." Sam was contemptuous. "You mean you've never? What did you do in Relocation? Listen to the radio?"

"Sure, I did," Bix said. Casually, he added, "We're getting a visio now."

"Now? Huh!" Sam landed skillfully and switched off the belt. "I reckon you'd like to try my belt," he said carefully. "Only Ma says I'm not to let anybody take it unless I'm around. And I gotta go in now." His eyes flicked towards Bix's wrist again.

"It's okay," Bix said, surprised. "See you."

He looked back when he reached the red dome of Amusement Unit and Sam was still spinning lazily above the Unit lawn.

He was full of tricks like that, Bix discovered. There had been some selfish guys in Relocation, but Sam's blinking pauses, his senseless snicker were new, puzzling. How did you get to be friends with a guy like that?

He shouldn't start Mom worrying again. But time was running out. The afternoon before takeoff day, Bix lingered in the kitchen.

"Mom," he began carefully, "do you still think I shouldn't expect too much?"

"Why darling, I do believe I was wrong," she said. "Everyone's been so nice! No one has said anything to you, I hope."

"No," Bix had to admit. But there was tomorrow — and Sam and he certainly weren't friends.

"That's fine!" Mom's eyes creased into the familiar heavy folds when she smiled. "Now, Bix, I don't want you fretting over that Rocket." Her smile became mischievous and she deliberately changed the subject. "Have you met Mr. Bernstein? He isn't exactly prejudiced, but he's certainly —"

"He gets kind of sore if you help him," Bix said.

"That's because he's crippled, dear. Helping him makes him more aware of it. Though he shouldn't take it that way; no one means to rub it in."

"Yeah," Bix said. "But, look, Mom, tomorrow —"

Zingg, the signal panel interrupted softly.

Mom's hands flew to her apron. "Oh, Bix, that's Mr. Burroughs, the Unit Manager. He promised to call. You take him into the living room; I'll be right in." She reached into the freezer for some bottled Moonblend.

Mr. Burroughs, ruddy, stocky, fairly bounced into the house. When Mom came in, he took her hand and beamed impartially upon her, Bix and the sparkling newness of Unit Blue.

"Very nice. Very nice!" he said. "Don't you find it so?"

"Indeed we do," Mom said gravely. "This is my son, Bix."

"Ah, Bix," Mr. Burroughs said. "And are you making lots of new friends?" Right away, he spotted the cam-rec. "Quite right to wear it," he nodded. "I'd never be without one if I were a Jew or Negro or Martian."

Bix didn't hear the slightest inflection.

"So refreshing!" Mr. Burroughs approved the Moonblend Bix's mother offered him. He turned back to Bix.

"Now, young man, you take prejudice! It's certainly sensible to tax it as the luxury it is, in this day and age, instead of making people pay for the right to own visios, anti-gravs or sports rockets. You're making them pay for what holds up progress instead of taxing what proves we've got it."

He laughed jovially, sipped and leaned back in his chair. "And we've put the Golden Rule on a cash basis, you might say. Perhaps I'm cynical, but I'm afraid it appeals to more people that way."

Bix shifted uneasily. "Jeeps," he ventured. "It is dopy that the same people who're smart enough to build Moon Rockets and reach Mars — stuff like that — have to have a Prejudice Tax."

Mr. Burroughs held up a soft, well-tended hand.

"Technology always outstrips psycho-sociology," he pontificated. "The P.T. law will close the gap."

"I would have thought education, instead, perhaps" . . . Bix's mother began timidly.

"You're absolutely right!" Mr. Burroughs boomed. "But there wasn't time! You understand, no one thought to find Mars behind us in technology. When we discovered this, well, there was a mass reaction, unfortunate, but quite understandable, which lumped Martians with our other minorities in one discriminated-against class."

Again, no inflection. Bix looked at his mother. She followed Mr. Burroughs' spreading of his hands as if she expected to see the fabled Cloth of Wisdom actually displayed before her.

"As your son said, it was too much of a paradox. Something had to be done. And something was done!" He smiled, proud to extend this wonderful, blanketing protection of the P.T. to them.

Well, he sure knew all the words. And he believed them, so you shouldn't grudge him his righteousness.

"Now if there is anything I can do —" Mr. Burroughs rose tentatively.

"Why, Bix wants awfully to see the takeoff tomorrow at the Moon Port." Mom ignored his stricken eyes and kept on calmly. "If you know of anyone in the Unit who's planning to go, if it won't put you to a lot of trouble —"

"Not at all." Mr. Burroughs was genuinely pleased to know there was something more he could arrange for them. "I like my Unit to be one big family." With a last fatherly beam, he departed.

Jeeps! But you couldn't say it to Mom's pleased, expectant face.

"Thanks!" Bix said gruffly.

He couldn't help thrilling in anticipation. But in the morning, when Mom archly suggested he go out and talk to Sam, he went reluctantly, still eager but ashamed to be.

"Hi," he said guardedly to Sam. He sniffed. "Hey, what smells so good?"

"Ma's baking cookies to take to Mary. Real cookies. They ain't like the stuff from Food Center. I s'pose you never tasted real cookies either at Relocation."

"No," Bix admitted. "Are they good?"

"Good?" Sam snorted. "Say, you wouldn't believe —"

"Sam!" A voice shrilled from Unit Green. "You, Sam!"

"Come on," Sam invited, grinning. Bix followed, deliberately casual.

That wonderful spicy warm-brown odor was stronger inside. Jeeps, those cookies must be super! Bix followed Sam to the sun-flooded kitchen where Mrs. Clay presided over her cookies.

When she caught sight of another figure behind her son, she automatically reached toward her hair. "Why, it's . . . Bix!" And her hand dropped. The string of hair, abandoned, draggled as before.

"Yeah, it's . . . Bix. You know . . . This is Ma." Sam propped himself against the wall and waited.

"I'm glad to know you, Mrs. Clay," Bix said carefully, noticing how her eyes avoided his face and dropped swiftly to his wrist.

"I've never used it," he confided impulsively.

"Hmpf!" She brushed the tip of her nose with a floury hand. "Well, I always think it's better if folks know their . . ." She paused. "Oh, it ain't hard for me to remember. But it's awful hard for some folks. Take my daughter, Mary, now."

She glanced at the clock. "You get along now, Sam. If you think you want to see that Rocket go off again."

"It *takes* off, Ma." He retreated a few steps and drooped against the freezer. "Bix, he ain't never seen a takeoff!"

"That so?" Fleetingly, Mrs. Clay looked at Bix. "Now, I was tellin' you about Mary. There's a girl always has spoke her mind. She ain't malicious, she just purely forgets."

Mrs. Clay got a plastibox and snapped it open. Her hands moved over the cookies, selecting and packing.

"Gonna tell Bix some more about Mary, Ma?"

"You hush, Sam Clay! Didn't I tell you to get along?"

Sam didn't stir. Puzzled, Bix looked from one to the other. It didn't look like Mrs. Clay meant to invite him along. But Sam had asked him into the house. He'd never done that before.

"I just want to show you how hard it is for some folks, you see," Mrs. Clay began in a sort of whine. "Now, Mary, she wrote me last week how she went into Martin's with Bertha. There was a partic'lar dress Bertha wanted awful bad. Green dress it was, Mary said. With one of them Martian vines sprangled all over it."

Again she paused. Bix drew a deep breath, smelling the warm deliciousness of the cookies.

"Well, a young chit had hold of the skirt, a-lookin' and a-lookin'. She had a nasty, sallow skin, rough and leathery as a . . ." Mrs. Clay's wise smile was careful on Bix's tightening face.

"Now you know she'd be a fright in green! Bertha, she's a redhead and she'd look just sweet! That's what made her mind so bad. So to make her feel better, Mary, she up and said, 'Never mind, honey. That's a — dress, for sure.'" Mrs. Clay sighed. "Just not thinking, poor lamb. But that chit had a recorder and she got the word, which you notice *I* didn't

repeat, and Mary had to phone Joe for money to pay the fine. Poor Joe! 'Course he can deduct it, but it runs him a lot of money, Mary being so unthinking!"

She peered at Bix, something deadly gleaming in her muddy eyes. "Want some cookies, Bix?"

There were a few left, broken or burned-edged. "No, thanks," Bix said.

"Well, you're welcome to them, I'm sure. Now, you Sam, you skip! It's getting awful late."

"Bix, he ain't never seen a takeoff," Sam repeated. Fascinated, he stared at Bix.

"I heard you! And I been meanin' right along to ask him." She faced Bix. "You want to go with us? Ride out to Mary's?"

"Thanks. I . . . I got to help Mom."

"Well, now!" Mrs. Clay exclaimed. "Well, now, ain't that too bad, Sam?" The gleam in her eyes was sharper, triumphant.

As Bix stepped off Green's porch, he heard their stifled laughter. And Sam saying, "Well, you asked him, Ma. You sure enough did."

Bix slunk into Unit Blue. But Mom wasn't there; she was probably at Food Center. Bix was glad. He wouldn't have to explain right away why he wasn't headed for the Moon Port with the Clays. He hoped he could think of a good reason.

He went into his bedroom, stared at the plastic walls. So new, so *smooth* — after Relocation. Yeah, it was sure swell, all right. Be too bad to spoil it for Mom. Sure swell. Sure swell. It spun in his mind until the meaning was lost.

Then he heard the harried, futile buzzing and looked at the window. Somehow a bee had gotten in. Mom would have to adjust the exterminator screens.

Bix watched the bee patiently assail the glass barrier, which baffled her more than the opaque walls. At last, he crossed and touched the buttons which opened the window and turned the screen entirely off.

You could *learn* to understand a poor, dumb bee.

