

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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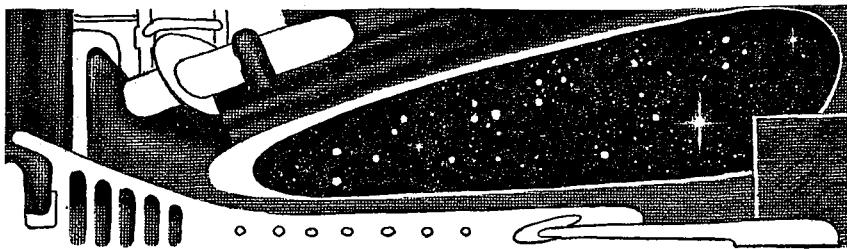
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# DEAD ON DEPARTURE

*If you have a goal, if you think you're going somewhere you want to go, then perhaps the jagged edges of the here-and-now can be blunted . . .*

By **MILTON LESSER**

*"Oh, they're much better off that way, Doctor. They have their own world and they look hopefully to the future."*

*"Well . . ."*

*"If only you could get aboard one of the ships and see, but of course, that's impossible."*

illustrated by FREAS





STATUES cluttered up the spaceship. Statues of spacemen and spacewomen blocked the radar screen, one tall woman with red polish on her fingernails forever pointing at a pip on the screen. A gray-haired statue sat at the pilot table, muscular hand inches from a lever, poised. Other statues stood cemented in your way in the corridors. You had to walk around them and you said it was queer because sometimes you'd see a foot resting on air as if waiting to take a step. Men and women statues and a few children statues, faces scrubbed but hair oddly not in place, slumbered in the bunk rooms. One woman statue stood stonily naked under a running shower, beautiful in her lack of motion with the water gleaming on her white skin; all the men visitors stopped and gaped. Jill made Lonnie turn away for he was ten and beginning to understand things, and he shouldn't see a naked woman like that while other men leered — even if she were a statue.

*You should think they'd get in the crew's way,* thought Jill. *And so realistic.*

"The main salon has been emptied for us," said the guide. Everyone followed him to the main salon, past the statues in the corridor, some with their mouths open as if they were talking; some carved as if to walk but eternally on the brink of taking just one step; some leaning with their elbows on the

bulkheads, their legs crossed easily. You wondered what held them up.

The real people, a dozen of them including Lonnie and his mother Jill, entered the main salon and soon sat around on the comfortable lounge chairs. Someone had thought to paint the signs of the Zodiac, glowing in three dimensions and in color, on the walls of the salon. It was very appropriate.

"What did you think of the statues?" said the guide, a trim man in a tailored, conservative uniform.

"Extraordinary."

"Beautiful."

"So real."

"Wax?"

The guide lit a perfumed cigarette, blew smoke rings and scented the salon delicately.

"I should think they'd get in the crew's way," said Jill.

"They are the crew," said the guide, talking to children, "and the passengers."

"Are the crew?"

"The crew?"

"No!"

"Yes," said the guide. "If you wondered why no one comes back from the stars, this is your answer. A thousand years to reach the Sirius System."

Someone laughed. "Oh, come off it."

"Really . . ."

"You were brought here to change your mind," said the guide. "Knowing the facts, we anticipate

it; most of you will change your mind and go home. Everything at home will be dead a thousand years when you reach Sirius. No news from home, no letters, no messages. Visitors, maybe, if they start out a year or two after you. Your local registration agencies are instructed to list you as Dead on Departure."

"He's not joking."

"Lord, it's like traveling through time. A thousand years."

A MAN stood up, scowling. Plump and approaching middle age, he wore expensive clothing. "My wife's been nagging, so I thought a trial separation would do us good. A trial separation." He chuckled at some obscure joke. "I'm going home." He got to his feet, waddled across the salon, clomped away down the corridor.

"Good," said the guide. "Any others? We apply a brake to your bodily functions, like slowing down a motion picture. You live a thousand times more slowly than other people; as far as you're concerned, you'll reach Sirius in a year. Subjective time, they call it. You have half an hour to decide." The guide plugged a phone into his ear and began listening to a magazine.

"Well," someone said.

"Yes," said someone else. In the beginning, meaningless little words filled the gap of incomprehension.

"Soon we'll be statues, and maybe people will come and look at us and say but they're so real."

"So what?"

"So what he says."

"What we don't know won't bother us; think the statues saw us?"

"Dunno."

"I'll tell you; they didn't. We move too fast."

"Oh," said a ponderous fat man, secretly delighted. Perhaps he thought he'd keep on visiting the outgoing ships and watching all the slow, slow people.

There was only one other woman, Jill realized, and no children at all for Lonnie to play with. For a thousand years. No, that was silly; one year. The other woman, somewhat younger than Jill and attractive in a tight-sweatered, clinging-slacked, made-up sort of way, sat together with a large, quiet man in a chair not big enough for both of them. The man had his large arm around her shoulder and she'd thrust her tight-sweatered chest up against his side, sitting twisted around on a small part of the chair, one tight-slacked buttock hanging over the edge. Some of the other men in the room looked at her and the large, quiet man seemed uneasy.

"Did the soldier mean I would be a statue and everything?" said Lonnie showing neither pleasure nor aversion at the idea but only a certain amount of curiosity.

"No," Jill told him after a while. It was true enough, for once they were made statues, they'd none of them know it.



"If that babe over there didn't have 'personal property' stamped all over her I might stay and enjoy the ride," declared an ectomorphic young man with gangling legs and sandy hair. Having asserted his masculinity that way, because his guts rebelled at a thousand years, he got up and left the salon.

The tight-sweatered woman's eyes followed him and told him to go off into a corner somewhere and die — quietly or noisily, they didn't care which.

"Once we get started everything will be all right," the large man said, and lapsed into silence once more.

"We're almost ready," said the

guide, pressing his fingers against the arm of his chair and making a clock appear briefly in the curve of Scorpio's stinger on the wall. "How many of you will go on to Sirius?"

**INERTIA** almost kept the ponderous fat man in his seat, but after a time, while he watched four of the remaining ten people leave the room, he climbed to his feet, jowls wagging, breath wheezing in his throat, and lumbered out into the corridor. He took a long time in doing it, moving with the complete gracelessness of a poorly-animated cartoon.

"That leaves five of you," the guide observed. "More than I expected, I must admit. You are sure, all of you? Positively sure?"

*I'm doing it for Lonnie as much as myself, Jill told herself. A boy should have a father — to teach him ball-playing, to take him fishing and swimming and hiking, to laugh with him and understand when he cries, not like a mother, but a man.*

Already Lonnie had shown signs of being fatherless — hardly ever during the week, unless some mother learned about Lonnie's father. It was on weekends, when none of the other boys would come outside and play with him because they were going somewhere with their fathers. Jill would try her best to make him happy, but really, it wasn't the same. And Lonnie would understand she was trying, and smile when he was supposed to; but he missed his father, who had been on his way to a thousand years away for more than a year.

*Maybe I'm rationalizing, Jill thought, for Lord knows I want Joel too, probably more than Lonnie does — his arms around me and his voice in my ear and the way he smiles, and his big gentle hands, and the quiet peaceful way he looks when he sleeps — not like an ex-convict who can't get a decent job, or live in a decent neighborhood on Earth, because in a fit of passion he killed a man once, but like a baby, almost.*

And maybe a thousand years in the deep black, echoless nothing

of space, with the stars not dancing nervously like they do through an ocean of air but looking at you steadily, unblinking — without malice but with a bright, clear understanding of all your sins and your unrequited desire to repent — would help. A thousand years rolled into one across the gulf of space with no top, no bottom, not even emptiness really because emptiness has got to fill something . . . perhaps space would have room for expiation, for Joel had killed the man because she . . . but he had forgiven her where she could not forgive herself. Oh, they'd try. She and Lonnie would certainly try.

The guide flamed another perfumed cigarette and made the clock appear in Scorpio again. "It's time," he said, "Goodbye, good luck." He left without another word.

"Kiss me, John," said the tight-sweatered woman, squirming on her part of the chair and thrusting herself more tightly against him. The large man kissed her quietly but thoroughly and Jill began to tell Lonnie stories, so he shouldn't watch, but he was watching anyway.

SOMEONE rushed into the room, breathless. "Had an argument with that skinny little man in the hall. I had to be briefed, and I wasn't briefed, he said. So I told him, 'Brief me,' and he said, 'A thousand years and everyone else will be dead and you'll have no one, absolutely no one, and no memories

that are real. Nothing.' So I laughed and told him it was like being immortal in a way, because everyone you know will be dead almost a thousand years, and you'll just be beginning to live. He looked awful surprised, as if maybe he ought to tell that to someone as a selling-point, or something and he said I could go if I was absolutely sure. Man, was I ever sure! We're immortal almost, and what's the difference if you move like the hour hand of a clock for a thousand years if everyone else around you moves like that too? Man. Jason Carmody is my name."

And Carmody, a tall, thin young man with bright-darting eyes and a rather handsome face, went around the room, shaking everyone's hand with an enthusiastic urgency. He shook Lonnies hand first, saying, "Hello there. I'm Jason Carmody. Call me Jase." And then he shook Jill's hand; he had a nice, firm grip.

He shook hands with the large quiet man, introducing himself again and with the tight-sweatered girl whose eyes appraised him, and this time said nothing, absolutely nothing. He shook hands with the final passenger, a burly, dark-haired man, neither young nor old, who sat silently in a corner, a magazine-phone plugged in his ear, and a look of almost lewd excitement on his large-featured face.

No one knew it, but while the enthusiastic young man named Jason Carmody went around shaking

hands, they all became statues.

## II

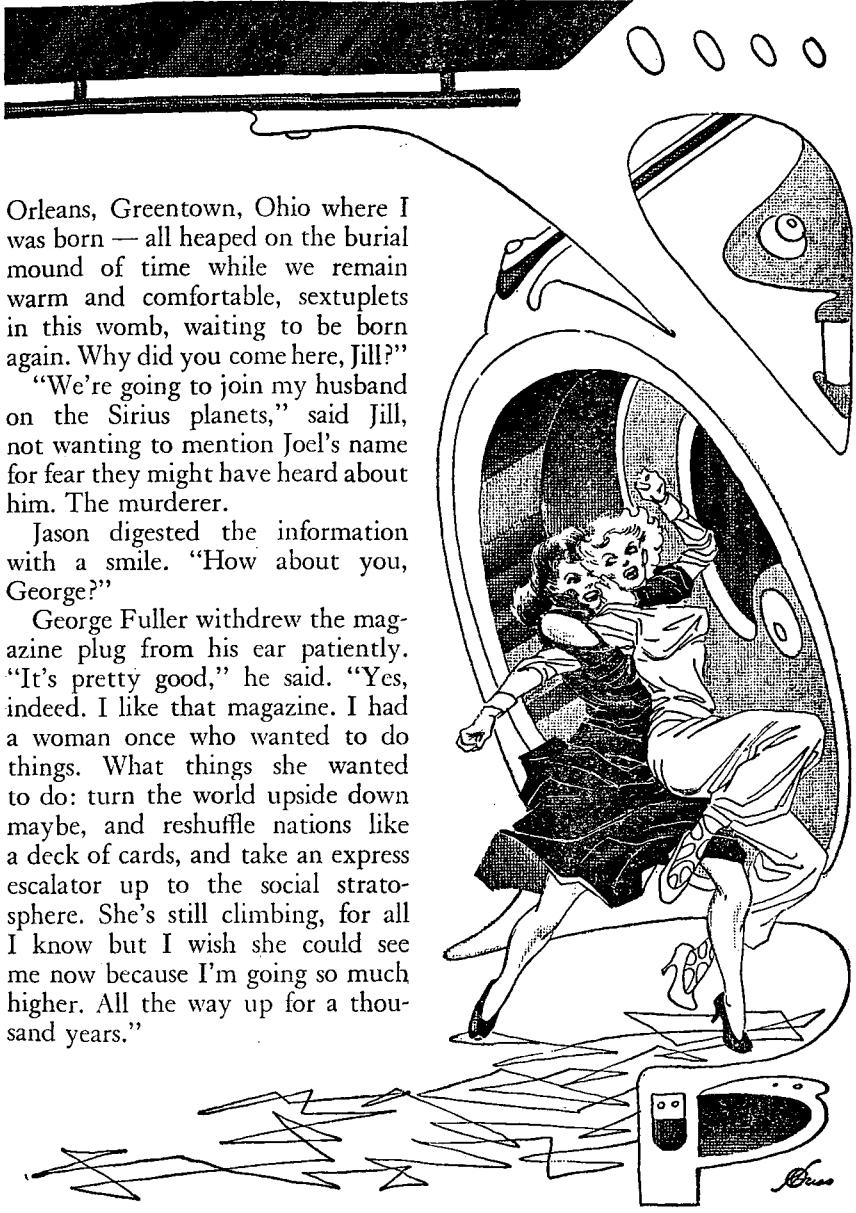
AFTER dinner, after meeting the statues who no longer seemed statues because now everyone functioned at the same speed, the half dozen new passengers returned to their lounge, their own private lounge it seemed, for no one bothered them. Jill found a spool of *Boy's Digest* and plugged it into Lonnies ear, watching him listen avidly. She stood up, stretching languidly, thinking they would retire early, since it had been a trying day for both of them; but when she saw Lonnies face she decided to let him listen some more.

"Really, we should be a close-knit group, almost like a family," Jason Carmody was saying. "Traveling across a thousand years together, and how many miles?"

"They don't measure it in miles," said the burly, neither young nor old dark-haired man whose name was George Fuller. "Almost nine light years, I think."

"That's right," said Jill.

"We are here like brothers and sisters, like twins," said Jason Carmody, looking around. "Sextuplets, I guess. All together in this place, immortal for a thousand years, everyone of us immortal for a thousand years for a different reason. They only forge structural steel to last a century back home. New York will be dust; London crumbled into rust and ruin; Paris, Chicago, New



Orleans, Greentown, Ohio where I was born — all heaped on the burial mound of time while we remain warm and comfortable, sextuplets in this womb, waiting to be born again. Why did you come here, Jill?"

"We're going to join my husband on the Sirius planets," said Jill, not wanting to mention Joel's name for fear they might have heard about him. The murderer.

Jason digested the information with a smile. "How about you, George?"

George Fuller withdrew the magazine plug from his ear patiently. "It's pretty good," he said. "Yes, indeed. I like that magazine. I had a woman once who wanted to do things. What things she wanted to do: turn the world upside down maybe, and reshuffle nations like a deck of cards, and take an express escalator up to the social stratosphere. She's still climbing, for all I know but I wish she could see me now because I'm going so much higher. All the way up for a thousand years."

"Do you hate her?" Jason asked innocently.

"Hate her? I don't hate anyone."

"I was just thinking she'll be dead a thousand years when we get where we're going." Jason turned to the couple, the large, quiet man named John and the tight-sweatered girl who had not told anyone her name, sitting in their too-small chair. "Mr. and Mrs. — uh, I don't believe we know your name . . . just why are you here?"

"You're a nice boy, Jason," said Tight-sweater, "so why don't you mind your own business?" Then those eyes of hers appraised Jason again, not saying anything but just looking, and she added: "We're not Mr. and Mrs. anybody; we're not married."

"Well," said the burly man, taking the magazine plug from his ear for the first time of his own accord.

"I wish you hadn't," John told the girl.

"My name is Phyllis," the tight-sweatered girl told Jason and George Fuller.

And then everyone but large, quiet John was talking about the little things at home, the little things they already missed but had waited for some of the stiffness to leave the room before they could say it.

"No more sunrise or sunset."

And the autumn wind shaking crisp scurrying flame from the trees.

And ice skating or swimming, fishing, bike-riding, hunting, hiking,

golfing, tennis, new performances of masterworks, or whatever you liked.

And leg room, elbow room, living room.

"Although sometimes the emptiest places can be crowded," George Fuller said.

AND Earth.

With people talking and walking and looking at you, a lot of people, all sizes, colors, shapes, complexions, convictions, smells.

"That's all wrong," Jason cried. "We have brotherhood here. Fraternity. No six people were ever thrown so close together. All for one and . . . well, you know."

"Three men, two women and a boy," said Phyllis, getting up from her shared chair and lighting Jason's cigarette for him. She breathed in the perfume and sighed. "That's very masculine. And a boy. He'll still be a boy a thousand years from now. Thinking of that can drive you crazy almost."

"It makes you shout and laugh and cry with joy," Jason told her patiently. "We'll outlive everyone; George, tell me how long we've been traveling."

George remembered what the guide had done, squeezing the yielding arm of his chair and making a clock appear in Scorpio. "Five and a half hours."

"Five thousand hours normal time!" Jason shrieked. "Quick, someone give me a pencil and

paper." It was Lonnie who found them in a desk, brought them to Jason. "Thank you, young man; thank you." Jason began scribbling furiously. "Five thousand hours," he mumbled. "Twenty four hours in a day. Five thousand divided by . . . let me see." He crumpled one sheet of paper into a ball, discarded it. "Thirty days in a month . . ." He held the final sheet aloft like a new Magna Carta.

"Seven months," he sighed tremulously. "A million people died; a million were born, screaming, into the world. Lovers quarrelled, battles were fought. It rained; crops grew, were parched by the sun, harvested. It became cold and snowed. It snowed on two and a half billion people living so fast they'll be dead before we really get to know each other." Pirouetting gracefully, he withdrew the cigarette from his mouth and kissed Phyllis full on the lips. "I love all of you."

"You shouldn't have," Phyllis told him, not retreating, smiling inches from his face with her full red lips.

"Phyllis," said John.

Jill stood up and told Lonnie to shut off the magazine. It's been a long day," she said to no one in particular. "Lonnie and I are going to bed."

"Wonderful," Jason told her. "It's quite wonderful."

"Hey, Mom, is he crazy or something?" Lonnie wanted to know as they left the salon.

"For Heaven's sake, Lonnie. Mind your manners. Jason is exuberant, that's all."

"Ex . . . well, I like him anyway."

*He should be going on eleven, but he's still only ten,* Jill thought as she showered and got into bed. She found herself liking the idea, and wondered if Jason's enthusiasm was contagious. More than a year, Earth time, would elapse while they slept, but ten-year-old Lonnie would greet her in the morning. Jason never would have made a mathematician: how long it took him to figure that simple problem in his childish eagerness! Lonnie would want to see Jason as much as possible, she thought dreamily. Lonnie and Jason . . .

*Joel, how far away across infinity are you right now?*

### III

As if by some common accord, five of them gathered in their salon prior to breakfast. Jason was there first, and perhaps he hadn't slept at all; but he greeted each one as he entered with "Good morning, immortal." Jason looked as well-rested as any.

Five of them, with large, taciturn John surrendering his chair, shedding it regretfully almost like some cherished item of clothing, and pacing the floor in moody silence. He swallowed his pride or deflated it with a self-inflicted needle. He said, "Has anyone seen Phyllis?"

"Has anyone here seen Phyllis?" Jason intoned boyishly then looked at John and said he was sorry. "No," he added a hasty amendment, "not since last evening."

George Fuller shook his head blankly, sitting down to enjoy the sound of his pre-breakfast magazine. What kind of magazine did a dilettante listen to on an empty stomach, Jill wondered. Sundries, she thought. Yes, sundries. Little pithy tidbits served up, soft-voiced, like a dish of hors d'oeuvres. "I'll try some of *those*," she could almost hear George Fuller thinking. "Ah . . ." he licked his lips.

Phyllis ran stumbling into the salon fifteen minutes later, pursued by invisible demons, screaming and screaming.

She threw herself against John's chest, sobbing, and he must have thought to comfort her for he raised his hands clumsily and stroked her hair. But she beat at his ribs with her small hard fists and began screaming again, a long piercing wail which rolled soft then loud, soft then loud. "You keep your hands off me! Keep your filthy . . . (and some other words) . . . hands off me." Then she was screaming again, and all the others words which meant "filthy" were lost in the sound.

"Mom, why's the lady crying?" asked Lonnie. "What's the matter?"

"Now, Phyllis," said John in confusion, but shrieking, she flung herself away from him, cupping her

face in her hands, her fingernails furrowing her own temples.

Jason came to her, touching her back with his hand almost delicately. "You!" she cried. "You're worse than all of them. You with your immortality and bliss and brotherhood. Go outside and tell me how immortal you feel. Go on outside, all of you . . . I hope you're satisfied, John; oh, I hope you are. This was the way to get away from my husband, was it? This was the way to end clandestine meetings, to avoid hiding and stolen moments. No more cheap, tawdry ugliness for us, oh, no."

Jason's hand retreated. "I'm sure John doesn't want you to bring up the past," he said, "not when we have our glorious present and magnificent future."

"She doesn't know what she's saying," John explained.

"Magnificent future, that's good!"

"A thousand years of space-voyaging and a new home far away among the stars after the things we knew and the people born with us are the dust of centuries."

"That's rich, that is. Jason's circumscribed little thousand year world came tumbling down around his ears." Phyllis' sobs and screams subsided. "Go outside; all of you."

George Fuller shrugged, unplugging his magazine. Jill led Lonnie by the hand, John looked at his woman's stiff-arched back, then followed regretfully. Jason led them

into the corridor with an eager, bouncing gait.

The statues had returned.

THEY stood cemented in the corridor in idle haphazard postures. One of them had his mouth open to laugh and perhaps he was laughing at time, for as far as Jill could see time had lost its meaning for him. Another posed ridiculously as some latter-day Napoleon, hand thrust into tunic front; but on closer scrutiny, Jill could see his raised knuckles and figured, ludicrously, he was scratching himself. How long, she wondered, would it take Napoleon to relieve himself of the itch? Another, a woman, had handkerchief to nose daintily and Jill looked in horror as Lonnie reached up laughing and slipped the lacy square from her immobile fingers. The woman stood there, hand to nose, lacking the reflexes to realize what had happened.

Warming to his task, Lonnie removed Napoleon's hand from his tunic forcing it down to his side.

"Lonnie, stop that. Don't touch them!" Jill screamed.

"S'matter, Mom? Someone brought the statues back, that's all. For us to play with."

"This is terrible," George Fuller said.

During the night, during the long obscuring night which was almost a year, something had gone wrong. Wheels had stopped spinning, or radiation had been screened, or per-

haps a day (almost two years) before, the guide had botched his work. The statues had returned. Subjectively, everyone aboard ship except the six newcomers had become statues again.

Objectively, something else had happened. Objectively, it was worse. Horror came on invisible wings, alighting on everyone's chest.

"We've been speeded up," said George Fuller. "We're normal again."

Jason laughed nervously. "Certainly not. Oh, no. We've merely been singled out, the six of us. All the others have been slowed still further — a million times, maybe. We're all right."

"Can you prove that?" George Fuller asked hopefully.

"Dear me, no; it's merely an idea."

"A ridiculous idea," Jill told him. "We are normal again. I — I can feel it." She could too, although she did not know how.

"Terrible," John said.

George Fuller sighed. "They don't have many magazines, really; enough for a year if I paced myself. But now —"

"Now you'll be memorizing every word," said Phyllis, who had regained her composure sufficiently to join them. "Now you'll commit everything to memory and one fine day you'll start babbling, and we'll all be babbling by then because I'll tell you what's going to happen: we're going to grow old in space and

watch the years go by and one by one we'll die of starvation, or old age or something, and when the last of us is a corpse, this space ship will hardly have started its journey.

"We'll see the statues in the hall here and soon we'll grow to hate them because while we get older they'll keep right on living waiting to see Sirius and the Sirius planets. They won't see us till we die and suddenly they'll wonder in their slow way where the corpses of old men and women came from — except little Lonnie, who should outlive all of us. And then after a time we'll get to hate each other and fight so help me if any of you comes near me I'll scratch his eyes out, because we're all in this together and friends and twins, like Jason said." She laughed insanely. "Aren't we all twins, Jason?"

JASON SAID, "Yes, of course."

"Shut up. Well, listen. You can all sulk off into corners and hang your heads and wail all you want. I've cried my share already. Not me, not this girl, you won't find me doing that. If this is where I have to live I'm going to live by God, because life always treated me like this anyway, kicking me in the teeth. I'll eat what I want and if we see we don't have enough food, better not look for it because I'll have it all. And I'll sleep with whom I want, all three of you, when *I* say so, not when you do —"

"Really, Phyllis." John was shak-

ing his head in stoic bewilderment.

"Don't you 'really Phyllis' me. That's what I'll do and don't try to stop me because if I killed myself you'd only have Jill here. That's a laugh — Jill who'll be waiting forever for the husband she'll never see, and he'll be finding a new woman nine hundred years after they take Jill's old withered corpse into space."

"Please," Jill pleaded. "Think of the boy."

"I'll think of him, all right! He's ten now, and growing up; he started growing last night, and at fourteen he'll be old enough to —"

Crack! Jill swung her hand wildly against Phyllis' cheek, striking it, numbing her own fingers and leaving their white imprint on the blood-reddened flesh. And then Jill was sobbing and running off down the corridor, weaving in and out among the statues, dimly aware that Phyllis had become hysterical again and was screaming. Let her scream while she could for no — what was that ugly word? — no nymphomaniac would take Lonnie and pervert him and . . . no, pervert was the wrong word, but he was so young and Jill wanted him to stay that way, young. Let her scream, because one day soon they might find her how she couldn't scream anymore, ever; and Lonnie was still a little boy.

Running thus, Jill collided with a statue and reintroduced it temporarily to normal time. The statue

tottered, no expression on its face. It fell with what Jill imagined was a great crash and when she crouched to look, the faintest flicker of surprise had tinged the features, and would probably remain for many minutes before pain replaced it.

Jill got up, plunging forward blindly, once more a flitting wraith among the statues. A wraith which finally dizzied, turned around, stumbled, fell in a huddled, sobbing heap.

SHE awoke in the salon, grave faces peering at her from out of the Zodiac background. "How much time has passed?" she demanded. She could almost feel her life slipping away, while the ship went absolutely nowhere, except for the statues.

"Only a few hours," said Jason.

"And are they —"

"Still statues," George Fuller finished for her.

"I don't care, Mom," Lonnie whispered tremulously, "as long as you're all right."

"Lonnie." She brought his head down to her, but he fidgeted, was restless.

"Aw, Mom. Hey, Mom. Listen, those statues are fun to play with after you catch on. You can make them do anything you want; and if they're set up one way, you can set them up another way and all."

"Lonnie, you shouldn't." After all, it was like being — what were those things called? — *poltergeists*,

mischiefous ghosts who went around changing things, throwing things, breaking things.

"If they're standing, you can make them sit, and if they're sitting, you can just push them off the chair; and if they're eating, you can take the food away and . . ."

"We found Lonnie in the dining room," George Fuller explained, "giving some people eight course dinners, starving others, spilling food on laps, unsetting set tables. He was having quite a time."

"I was looking for you, Mom, only I couldn't find you. But those statues, I haven't had so much fun since Daddy —"

"We mustn't talk about your father, ever again; we're never going to see your father, do you understand me? Not ever."

"Aw, Mom. You said . . ."

"Never." A lump caught painfully in Jill's throat. A month would go by for Joel — swiftly because he looked to the future eagerly, as they had — and they would be dead. A month while Joel would count himself that much closer to journey's end, but a whole lifetime of sameness and hopelessness for them — and then they would be blown out into space with garbage, all kinds of refuse. Then, centuries later, Joel would reach the Sirius planets, build a home, get a job — and wait. The ship would come in and he wouldn't find them. Maybe the statues would know about them and be able to tell him, and maybe

they wouldn't know. Perhaps that would be better for him, because he might talk himself into believing they'd changed their minds, stayed on Earth and lived normally.

"You can make them do anything," said Lonnie again.

"Perhaps we are no longer immortal," Jason admitted, but still eagerly. "Perhaps there has been some error and, well, those things happen, I suppose. What I mean is if the statues are helpless before our speed — and they are — we might be able to turn this spaceship around and back to Earth, get everything fixed, and start out again."

There was a silence while George Fuller and Jill paid quiet homage to their Saviour.

"Why didn't we think of it sooner?" Jill asked. "Two years out and two back, that's only four years. Four years, Jason; we could start all over again after that." It was better than nothing, but Lonnie would be fourteen by the time they began again, and fifteen when they reached Sirius planets. Fifteen isn't old but Lonnie would be approaching manhood so fast, and if he had to spend the in-between years on a spaceship, on the same spaceship with that Phyllis . . .

"Do you know anything about driving one of these things?" said George Fuller.

JASON looked at him blankly. "What things?"

"Spaceships, this spaceship."

"You don't drive a spaceship, you pilot it; you astrogate it. Now that you mention it, no. You?"

"Not me," said George Fuller. "Been meaning to listen to one of those how-to magazines, but never got around to it. Maybe Jill . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Jill; "I don't even drive a copter."

"How about that?" George Fuller asked glumly. "We have the idea to get us out of this mess but we can't use it."

"You're forgetting Phyllis and John," Jason reminded him. "Perhaps one of them . . ."

"I have a hunch the only thing Phyllis can drive," Jill said spitefully, "is a hard bargain. As for John, I really couldn't say; he's so quiet though." As if you had to spit sparks and flaming gas to pilot a spaceship, she thought, amused by her own illogic.

"He's very, very, quiet."

They all looked around.

It was Phyllis, with blood on her hands. "He's quiet, all right. My God, you never saw someone so quiet."

She sat down in what had been their shared chair and started to laugh. "He made a . . . great big fuss . . . for a while and I never . . . could stand great big fusses, which is why I left my husband and . . . John should have known better."

George Fuller swore softly. "Where is he?"

"We shared a bedroom, too."

George Fuller had been agitated from his ear-plug lethargy for the first time. "I'll go see."

Jill drew a glass of water from the bar, but Phyllis wouldn't drink it. "Hello, Lonnie," she said, making eyes at him.

#### IV

JILL SAID, "For Heaven's sake, Phyllis. He's a baby. You're more than twice his age." *And a murderer, besides*, Jill was thinking, but didn't say it both because it would make a scene and further upset Lonnie and because Joel, too, was a murderer. Couldn't you say, if you got right down to it, they had both murdered for the same reason, more or less? Joel because he would not share something, Phyllis because she *wanted* to share something? And if a little child never grew up and never encountered that kind of ugliness, wouldn't he be far happier?

Phyllis was tickling Lonnie with her still-bloody hands and at first Lonnie seemed nonplussed, but presently he began to laugh; Phyllis helped him get into the spirit of things and she kept on tickling him and he kept on laughing.

"You stop that at once," said Jill, still holding the glass of water in her hand.

"She's merely playing with him," Jason told Jill calmly; "a boy needs playing."

"And a man?" Phyllis looked up long enough to ask. "Doesn't a man, Jason?"

Jason blushed. "There was a woman I liked once, but —"

Phyllis snorted and poked her long fingers in Lonnie's ribs again, smiling when he laughed. Jill shuddered. There was so much which *could* corrupt an impressionable child, a boy. It never ended happily, even for adults. Joel had killed a man, and Joel was on his way to the Sirius planets where he would wait for his wife who would never arrive. And Jill, Jill foolishly had had evanescent joy with two men once — and the price was a dead man, a convict and an exile in space — with no one happy. A too-ambitious woman had driven George Fuller to *his* exile in space, and Jason was extremely exuberant from the neck up — probably because he had lost all exuberance from the neck down.

Phyllis stopped to catch her breath.

"More!" Lonnie cried in delight, and Jill sloshed the contents of her water glass full in Phyllis' face.

Phyllis shrieked, and so did Lonnie. Phyllis leaped at her, clawing. "Hold it!" George Fuller cried, entering the salon. "I thought you'd all like to know John is dead."

"I told you," said Phyllis.

"Three gashes in his chest, and all bloody, and the knife lies at his side. Phyllis you must be punished for this." George Fuller blubbered. "Why did you have to ruin everything? We got back to Earth or we didn't, we stayed fast or we became slow — I didn't care. I liked it

here, I liked it fine, but because you had to go and kill a man, and there are moral laws which say you must be punished . . . you've certainly made a mess of things."

"Can you pilot a spaceship?" Jason asked Phyllis.

"Pilot a spaceship? Don't be ridiculous. And you mind your own business, George; John had it coming to him. I did it for you, anyway. You and Jason. And Lonnie." She blotted her face with a handkerchief.

"Why don't we leave them a note?" Jason demanded abruptly. "That will stay in one place long enough for them to see it."

"Do what you want," George Fuller mumbled.

"A note," said Jill, not very enthusiastically. "Yes, it would work."

Jason found paper and pencil, began to write. When he finished, he read it to them. *Dear Sirs: Something went wrong with whatever slows people down, because there are five of us who are living normally. That means we'll die in space long before we reach Sirius unless, in your magnanimity, you do something about it. Turn this ship back to Earth for repairs and we can all start out again. But please hurry, for it may take weeks of normal time before you see this letter. Our fate is in your hands and God's.*" Jason grinned self-consciously. "Well, what do you think?"

"That's splendid," Jill told him. Strangely, it failed to stir her.

"I'll leave it in the control-room," said Jason.

"Wait," Jill said on impulse. "Let me; you men will want to discuss the murder anyway."

"I suppose we must," George admitted. "That was a terrible thing, Phyllis; there's always got to be someone to spoil things."

"I'll go with you," Phyllis told Jill, who was so surprised she found herself nodding as Jason carefully folded the letter and gave it to her.

"'S'long, Mom. When can we play more, Phyllis?" Lonnie called after them.

THEY walked among the familiar statues in silence, until Phyllis finally said: "Some day we're going to hate them terribly."

"Who?"

"The statues. Unless this note works. You know, Jill, I probably have seen more of this ship than all of you put together. I've done a lot of walking around, found some interesting things. Here, for instance."

Phyllis steered Jill down a short corridor. It ended in a dozen paces. The whole wall was a huge metal door with a glass window in it.

"Take a look," Phyllis suggested.

Jill peered through the window. "Why, it's a little room with another door at the other end."

"It's an airlock," Phyllis explained. "That's how you get into and out of a spaceship. Here, watch." There were four buttons on the wall, with printing under each one. *Open inner door. Close inner door. Open outer door. Close outer door.*

Phyllis pressed the first button and Jill heard the distant whirring of machinery. The ponderous door swung in toward them, revealing layer after layer of thick, rubberlike insulation. There was something frightening about the small room thus revealed, as if it had its own private ghosts to haunt whoever stepped inside.

"Come on in," Phyllis invited.

"N-no, thanks."

Phyllis got hold of her arm, yanked her. "Come on."

"Please."

Phyllis wrestled her inside the little room. "You're the only one who can spoil my plans with your righteousness. I could spend a pretty good life on this ship doing what I want, and if I wait long enough —"

She was strong. Jill was only beginning to fathom her intention, and found to her horror she could not seem to do anything about it.

"— if I wait long enough . . . there's Lonnie."

Jill sobbed, suddenly stronger. She writhed free, stumbled through the open door, kicking out with her foot when Phyllis tried to stop her. Her heel struck something soft and yielding. There was a scream, and then Jill stood in the corridor again. Panting, she pressed the button which said: *Close inner door*.

The ponderous door swung shut.

Phyllis' face appeared at the glass window, beseechingly. She clawed the smooth thick glass soundlessly with her fingernails. Tears rolled

down her cheeks. She pounded on the glass and made not a sound.

*She's ugly and unclean. She wanted to kill me. She doesn't deserve to live. The murderer.*

Jill pressed the button which said: *Open outer door*. A great invisible hand seemed to catch Phyllis up like a flake of confetti and draw her out, twisting and tumbling into the blackness thus revealed.

Jill closed the outer door and walked on, slowly among the statues, toward the control room.

She wouldn't know what had happened to Phyllis, of course; Phyllis just walked off. Let them try to find her; let them prove anything. Now Lonnie was hers again, all hers, and after the statues had the letter and a sufficient length of time to read it, they would turn the great ship around for Earth and one day soon all of them would be statues again and on their way to Sirius . . . and Joel. (Phyllis was a murderer, too.)

LONNIE was so young and innocent, and he didn't know it; but he was happy that way. Much happier, yes. As he matured, the problems of growing up would beset him and then he would grow too big to come crying to his mother and he would have to suffer in pouting throat-lumped silence. Children were so pure and clean and — well, inviolate. All children, she supposed, but most of all, Lonnie.

She'd been a child once, but so

long ago it seemed. One day she'd been playing down on the beach; she'd walked home alone and a big, ugly man had followed her and tried to do things. She'd screamed and screamed until the police came, but sometimes still she had nightmares about it. Joel's victim had screamed that way, almost, and to this day she never knew why she let Charles do what he did. But Joel had never asked her, merely choking the life out of Charles, there, right in front of her. Then he called the police and not saying anything to her all the while, but wrote to her from prison, forgiving her and being so sweet — because maybe he loved Lonnie, too, and Lonnie was only three then.

Well, let it be. If everything worked out they would reach the Sirius planets and Joel one day in the future — and that would be that. But still . . . although Phyllis was dead, drifting off, a meteor, in space, could she really say Lonnie was safe? There would be other girls, other women, more subtle than Phyllis, yes, but more painful because of it.

If only Lonnie could stay the way he was, a little boy, without ever having to grow up, or . . . but suppose he did grow up, in a world that never changed, where all he knew were the arms of his mother, protective and not insistent, and so remained a child, happy and guileless all his life? Could they really expect happiness on the Sirius planets? Sirius had seemed so far

away and so impossible that she'd said, "Yes, yes, I'll go." But not that they really could reach Sirius. Why should Sirius be any different from Earth? Change of scenery, but the same people, she suspected.

George Fuller and his magazines wouldn't give them any trouble. Jason's exuberance was harmless, and Jason would cheerfully spend the rest of his life trying to find immortality again. If ever she had to . . . submit to one of them, so what? As long as Lonnie didn't know, didn't suspect, didn't learn . . .

She read the note again. *Our fate is in your hands and God's.*

Oh, it would be pleasant, just floating on serenely through the void, going nowhere, absolutely nowhere, in a tight little world which offers up no serious problems. With a little boy to care for and teach and comfort, all your life.

She tore the note into tiny pieces and stuffed them in one of the statue's pockets, thought better of it and scattered the hundreds of snips among several pockets, several statues. Rubbish, accumulated from somewhere and to be thrown away, the statues would think. George Fuller and Jason would find nothing, and if Jason asked about the note (George Fuller wouldn't) she would tell him everything was all right. And if Jason thought after a time to make another note, she would carefully make sure the same thing happened.

She was doing it for Lonnie, of course.

The strains of her own secret symphony stirring in her ear, she returned to the salon, where George Fuller was sitting, magazine plugged into his ear, a look of bovine contentment on his face. Jason rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Now that they've got the note, we'll all be immortal again before long. Sirius, here we come!"

"What shall I do now, Mom?" Lonnie asked, not even thinking of Phyllis. Jill said she would tell him a story. A twinge of pain entered her consciousness when she thought of far Joel for the last time, but maybe Joel would want to kill someone else some day and she must never think of him again.

"I'm feeling great," said Jason.

"It must be something in the air," said Jill, "for so am I."

*"Everything is perfect, doctor. From what we can gather on the open radio circuits we use occasionally, it gets them every time. The statues look so real. The mental cases actually believe they're going someplace, not just space-drifting all their lives. They're happy as a consequence. When the statues lose their animation, we believe the passengers will spend the rest of their natural lives trying to fix things. And so be happy, always. As far as Earth is concerned, we've developed a completely painless, deathless euthanasia. It's expensive, but what do you think?"*

*"What about those who change their minds?"*

*"Oh, we try 'em again in a month or so. Eventually all of them go. It's the best thing for them, don't you agree?"*

