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SATELLITE

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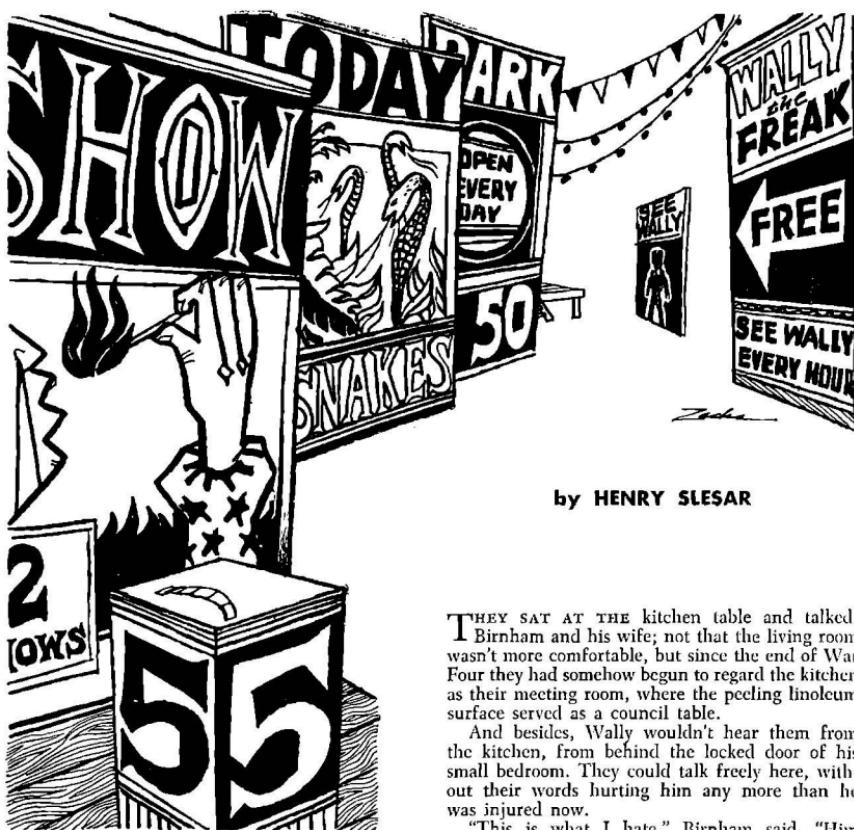
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JOB OFFER

World War Four had left a very serious employment problem for parents to grapple with. It was tragic . . . heart-rending in more ways than one.



by HENRY SLESAR

THEY SAT AT THE kitchen table and talked, Birnham and his wife; not that the living room wasn't more comfortable, but since the end of War Four they had somehow begun to regard the kitchen as their meeting room, where the peeling linoleum surface served as a council table.

And besides, Wally wouldn't hear them from the kitchen, from behind the locked door of his small bedroom. They could talk freely here, without their words hurting him any more than he was injured now.

"This is what I hate," Birnham said. "Him

loafin' around his bedroom all day, never going out, not a peep outa him."

"He's brooding," his wife said. "You know how he feels, Joe. Sort of mixed up and everything, about this offer. He's thinking it over."

"What's there to think over? Say, you know how many jobs the videopaper listed this morning, in the whole goddamn cityzone? Fifteen!"

"But you *know* how he feels about it. He'll have to do just what he hated all his life. Let people stare at him."

"He should be used to it by now. Aw, listen, Sheila, I know what the kid's going through. Hell, of course I do. But he's over twenty-one; he knows the score. He ain't never gonna be drafted, not the way he is, all funny like that, so we can't depend on the Army feeding and housing him. You know I ain't earned more than fifty stamps since the War. He should be grateful Mr. Metelkopf made him the offer."

"He's such a nice man," Sheila said, smoothing her skirt. "He talks so respectable. I thought people like that were—well, you know. Not so educated."

"Metelkopf's the biggest man in the circus business. He knows his stuff, don't worry about that. I mean, it won't be like any old freak show Wally would be in. It would be more like a—well, like a scientific curiosity."

"But the staring," his wife sighed. "Wally always hated the staring. He hated being so different from everybody."

"But he *is* different. He should see a mirror once in a while. He should go out into the Shelters and see people. He should FACE FACTS."

"Don't shout, Joe. Nothing wrong with his ears."

Birnham looked contrite. "I'm sorry, Sheila. But it's tough on me, too. They're talking about another stampcut at the plankton plant. And all this talk about War Five—"

"No," Sheila said, going white. "Don't say that, Joe. I mean, the President told us—"

"So maybe it was just talk. Things are rough, Sheila. We got no excuse not to look facts in the face. Wally, too."

"Shush," his wife said, looking at the doorway of the kitchen where their son stood watching.

"I made up my mind," Wally said.

"That's good," his mother crooned, "Anything you want to do is all right with us, Wally. You know that."

"Sure," the boy said bitterly, and went to the telephone. He looked up before he dialed, and said: "I'm telling Metelkopf yes. In case you want to know."

Birnham and his wife watched their son complete the call. They watched with pain in their eyes, the pain that never eased when his tall slim figure was in their sight, the strange balance of his weird body, the arms equidistant and uniform, the head neatly at midpoint of his square shoulders, the two legs growing straight from his torso to the ground. They sighed, and Birnham put his arms about his wife's shoulders, and the third arm reached up and gently wiped the tear that was squeezing its way from the single eye set into her wrinkled brow.