

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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LESSON FOR TODAY

By

Joel Nydahl

With the world destroyed around them, Helen wondered why she and Robbie were still left alive. There must be a reason—and of course, there was . . .

"While we remain in our invisible space-ship, the inhabitants of this world cannot see us. Prepare to take notes now in preparation for your final exam on the subject Alien Creatures and Their Actions in Given Situations. Notice below us the female of the dominant Species. She is with her child . . ."

CLUTCHING Robbie in her arms and holding him tight, Helen Thompson sat down wearily on the ground. The cold and dampness was all around her, boring through the thin cotton dress she wore. Her flesh was cold and her dark brown hair hung in ringlets over her forehead. She wore no shoes. She had lost them miles back, near the ruins at the edge of Chicago. Her feet were blistered

and bleeding, numb now from the cold of early morning.

Carefully she put her sleeping child on the ground for a moment as she rubbed her feet trying to restore circulation. Slowly feeling came back and then she flinched as pain shot up her legs.

She picked up the child and started again, heading westward.

* * *

"See the way she tries to protect her young, cradling it in her arms, shielding it from the coldness with her own body."

* * *

Now the sun was higher in the sky. The cold was gone now. But still there was something surrounding her, enclosing her, almost like a prison wall. Yet she could not see it.

Radiation!



Radiation from the long exploded bombs. It poisoned the air. It killed all vegetation. It killed all the animals. All except the two of them, the woman and her child. It had spared them. Not because it wanted to, but because it had to. Vaguely she remembered . . .

SHE and Robbie had been sitting in a Chicago park when the first bomb dropped. It fell quite near them, about three miles away. She remembered the bright blinding flash. Above them the branch of a tree cracked. It fell to a point twenty feet over their heads. Then it stopped. It was as if some force held it back. The force, whatever it was, also held back the heat. But it didn't stop her from fainting in terror.

When she regained consciousness, the burned and broken city lay all around them. Buildings were fused together. Everywhere was destruction. Everywhere except around she and Robbie. There, the grass was green and flowers grew. At the edge where the green ended and the black began, there was a pile of rubbish piled up *as if leaning against something*. She picked up a stick nearby and threw it. It reached the point where the green stopped and then it too stopped, *in the middle of the air*. Finally it fell to the ground.

She arose and walked over to where the stick lay. She extended her hand a few feet in front of her, and touched something. Something tangible, yet she could not see it. And no matter how hard she pushed, she could not extend her hand beyond a given point.

A dome was covering them and protecting them!

For weeks she and Robbie stayed under the dome while the wind took some of the radiation away. Each morning, when they awoke, a package of food lay by their side. Strange food, food they had never tasted or seen before. *Alien food.*

They had been spared by — what?

The puzzling thoughts spun in her mind. *Why* were they being spared? *Who* was sparing them?

Then one day, weeks after the bombs dropped, the dome disappeared. She could not see it disappear, but she knew that it was gone for the pile of ash that had leaned against it fell to the ground.

Then she started out with but one thought in mind. *I must find Johnny!* Across country she went, through small towns filled with death.

She walked, with Robbie stumbling along at her side, his small face wide with wonder and fear. Her heart ached as she looked into his staring eyes, while an occasional whimper left his lips. “. . .

mommy, where's Daddy? Where is he, mommy?"

She gripped his hand tighter and continued to walk, each mile a numb and crazy nightmare.

* * *

"Now take note of the setting the aliens are in. It took careful planning for our scientists to devastate the planet's surface as you now witness."

* * *

It was late afternoon when Helen stopped to rest by a seared oak tree. Robbie had been walking beside her. Suddenly he turned and looked up at her. "Mommy, why are we walking so far? I'm tired of walking. I don't want to walk any more. Where is daddy?"

"Hush, dear. We're going to find daddy." She knew they would never find him . . . alive. But something made her keep going. Something inside wouldn't let her turn back. *She had to know . . .*

"We've got to find daddy so he'll make everything right again, don't we?"

She hesitated before answering. "Yes—yes that's it. We've got to find daddy so he can help us—and make everything right again!"

"Oh."

"Go to sleep, Robbie. You've got to rest."

"But I'm hungry."

"Sleep, dear. We'll eat . . .

later." She kissed him, sat on the ground beside him and rocked his head in her weary arms.

* * *

"For those of you students who do not understand the languages of this planet, I'll interpret. She was trying to comfort her young one, telling him that his father was going to make everything right again when they found him. While inwardly she knew they would never find him alive. Primitive peoples often react to disasters in this way, making themselves and others around them believe things that are not true."

* * *

SLOWLY Helen opened her eyes. She sat up slowly, taking in the scene around her. She sat that way for a moment, thinking, her mind far from there, somewhere in southern France where her aunt and uncle were. She wondered if—

"Robbie," she whispered. She nudged his shoulder gently, trying to awaken him. Finally his eyes opened. He smiled wistfully.

"Get up, dear. We've got to be going now."

"I'm hungry."

"I know. So am I. We'll find something to eat pretty soon. You will have to wait."

"But—" Tears came to his eyes. One ran down his dirty cheek, making a rivulet.

"Please Robbie," she pleaded. "Don't cry. Remember what daddy always said, 'A smile blocks up the tears.'" He smiled weakly. "Now buck up," she added.

She took his hand and they started walking.

* * *

"Reading her mind, I see that she is more concerned over her child's welfare than her own. This is very unusual in primitive races."

* * *

They entered a small town. Down the main street they walked. The town was deserted, but showed no sign of being bombed or burned. In the street, numerous automobiles were parked. But she saw no people . . .

They entered a restaurant. Inside, the tables and chairs were in good order except for a half inch of dust and a few dirty dishes. She inspected the kitchen and found what she had been looking for. Canned food.

"Robbie," she called. "Where are you?"

She walked back to the door of the kitchen and looked into the restaurant. Robbie was not there . . . Then she saw him through the restaurant windows, standing on the street outside. She called "Robbie—I've found some food!"

Robbie turned, his small face twisted with hunger. He started back toward the door. ◊

She returned to the kitchen and looked for a can opener.

* * *

"We will drop down a few hundred feet and pick up the young one with our magnetic-force-field. We shall examine him."

* * *

One moment Robbie was standing at the restaurant door, and the next he was floating upward in the middle of the air. There was a strange sensation in his stomach. He was scared. He started to cry.

* * *

"Notice the noise he makes with his mouth. This is not a form of communication, but rather he is using a primitive form of expressing his thoughts, which is called crying. Reading his mind, I find only confusion and fear. He wonders where he is, but knows that he doesn't like it."

"Another interesting fact about these aliens is that they feel pain. It is hard to understand and even harder to explain. But I will try. We are aware of touching something or somebody only as a sensation on the skin. These people have more than that. Now watch. As I cut the skin of this young one slightly, notice that he jerks and screams louder. He is feeling pain. It is a strong sensation that leaves a sharp impression on the brain. That does not fully explain it, but it is the best I can

do along with this demonstration."

* * *

"OH, good God! Robbie! What happened, honey. What happened?" Then she saw the blood dripping on the floor. "*Robbie, your arm!*"

Then he was in her arms, sobbing hysterically. "I—I . . . they took me, and cut me—and . . ." but he could go no further.

Carefully, she laid him on a table and examined his arm. The bleeding had subsided some. She took a clean wet cloth and wiped off the blood. Then she bandaged it.

Robbie had stopped sobbing now, but the tears were still coming. She tried to get the story of what had happened to him, but what she did hear, she didn't believe.

After he finished she said, "Now, Robbie, I can't believe that you were lifted into the air by a spaceship, tied to a table and cut in the arm by some monster!"

"But Mommy, that's what happened. Honest! And when I was laying on the table I heard them talking. But I couldn't understand what they were saying!"

A grimness filled her as he spoke. And then a terrible horror spread through her. She remembered the Chicago park, when the bombs fell—how they alone seemed to be spared death . . . *Was it possible? . . .*

She grabbed Robbie into her arms and dashed up the street away from the restaurant. She saw a car standing by the curb and ran to it. There were keys in the ignition. She put Robbie on the front seat and got in. As the motor coughed into life she meshed gears and sped out of the town. One thing buzzed in her mind. *Peoria—that's where Johnny is—oh, Johnny—help us!*

* * *

"The conveyance in which you now see them is called an automobile. It is propelled by a liquid fuel, gasoline, in an internal combustion engine. We purposely had the automobile left there for them."

* * *

She drove through the industrial section of Peoria. She knew she was near the factory where Johnny worked. She started looking for the building, thinking how unfair it was for Johnny to have taken a job so far from Chicago. But her heart lifted as she thought about her husband. *Johnny — Johnny, we're here!*

There! To her left. There it was! She stopped the car, took Robbie's hand and ran toward the building.

"Mommy, is this where daddy is? Is he here?" Robbie's voice trembled.

She nodded her head as they ran. "Yes, Robbie — daddy's

here!"

She reached the building. The door was open and they stepped inside.

She was breathless now. Johnny—so close . . . She led Robbie to the stairs and her knees shook as they went up. "Johnny! Johnny!" she called, her voice close to hysteria.

But there was only silence.

She ran down the hall on the second floor, pulling Robbie with her, heard him sobbing. Then she saw the door and the gold letters on it. JOHN THOMPSON.

"Robbie, stay here." She hesitated. Her hands were cold and clammy. She was trembling.

She shoved open the door.

She screamed.

There on the floor lay a body. It had once been a man. Now there was only a skeleton of bleached white bones. Then she saw *it*. On the ring finger of his right hand. A gold ring with silver letters on black onyx. Johnny's . . .

Then she was running and screaming. Screaming and running. Down the stairs and out the door. Behind her Robbie followed, crying, terror in his small eyes.

She collapsed on the ground, her body shaking with sobs. Robbie fell beside her.

She put her arms around him, clutched his body to her. "Oh, Robbie," she cried. "You're the only thing I have left in the world. I love you. Don't leave me. Don't ever leave me." She snuggled him closer to her.

Then she looked at his face. She gave a little cry in her throat. She looked closer. Covering his skin were small red sores. What was it she had once read in a book?—Something about radiation poisoning—red sores appearing just before death—

"No, Robbie! Oh, no!"

He looked up at her, his eyes hot and feverish. He tried to talk but the words bubbled on his lips.

She pressed him to her breast and rocked him, shaking her head. "No, Robbie! Don't leave me! . . ."

She felt the beating of his heart against hers. Slower. His small body twitched. Then grew silent.

. . . She sat there on the ground, holding the still form in her arms long after the sun had set. The Moon shone down with a silver glow, bathing the child's dead body in its soft light. It shone in the woman's eyes too, glazed eyes, with a dead mind behind them . . .

* * *

"That concludes our lesson for today."