

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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Life Sentence

By JAMES McCONNELL

*"Happy New Year!" she cried.
But how often should one hear
it said in a single lifetime?*

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS



OUTSIDE, bells were ringing. "Happy New Year!" The mad sound of people crazed for the moment, shouting, echoed the bells.

"Happy New Year!"

A sound of music, waxing, waning, now joined in wild symphony by the voices, now left alone to counterpoint the noise of human celebration. . . .

For a while, Oliver Symmes heard the raucous music of the

crowd. It became a part of him, seemed to come from somewhere inside him, gave him life. And then, as always, it passed on, leaving him empty.

Shadows. . . .

The door to his room opened and a young-looking woman, dressed in a pleasant green uniform, came in and turned up the light. On her sleeve she wore the badge of geriatrician, with the motto, "To Care for the Aged."

"Happy New Year, Mr. Symmes," she said, and went over to stand by the window. In the mild light, the sheen of her hair attracted attention away from the slight imperfections of her face.

She watched the crowd outside, wishing she could be a part of it. There seemed so little life inside the prison where the only function of living was the awaiting of death. "To Care for the Aged." That meant to like and love them as well as to take physical care of them. Only, somehow, it seemed so hard to *really* love them.

She sighed and turned away from the window to look at one of the reasons she could not be like with the rest of the world that night.

HE sat bunched up in his chair like a vegetable. She could have closed one of her hands around both his arms together.

Or his legs. Bones and skin and a few little muscles left, and that was all. Skin tight, drumlike, against the skull. Cheeks shrunk, lips slightly parted by the contraction of the skin. Even the wrinkles he should have had were erased by the shrinkage of the epidermis. Even in a strong light, the faint wrinkle lines were barely visible.

After a moment of looking at him, she put a smile back on her face and repeated her greeting.

"I said, 'Happy New Year,' Mr. Symmes."

He raised his eyes to her for a moment, then slowly lowered them, uncomprehendingly.

"He looks just a little bit like a caricature," she said to herself, feeling a little more tenderness towards him. "A cute little stick man made of leaves and twigs and old bark and. . . ."

SHADOWS. For so long there had been shadows. And for a time the fleeting passage of dreams and past memories had been a solace. But now the shadows were withered and old, debilitated and desiccated. They had been sucked dry of interest long ago.

But still they flitted through his mind on crippled wings, flapping about briefly in the now-narrowed shell of his consciousness, then fading back among the

cobwebs. Every once in a while, one of them would return to exercise its wings.

"Did she say, 'Happy New Year?'" he wondered. "New Year's?"

And, at the thought of it, there came shadows out of the past. . .

YOUNG Oliver Symmes laughed. The girl laughed, too. She was good to hold in one's arms, soft like a furry animal, yielding and plush of mouth.

"I love you, Ollie," she said, the warmth of her body close against his.

He laughed again and wrapped her in his arms. He owned her now, owned her smile, her love for him, her mind and her wonderful body. She belonged to him, and the thrill of ownership was strong and exciting.

"I'll always love you, Ollie. I'll love only you." She ran her fingers in and out of his hair, caressing each strand as it went through her fingers. "I love the strength of your arms, the firmness of your body."

Again he laughed, surrendering all his consciousness to the warm magic of her spell.

"I love the shading of your hair and eyes, the smooth angularity of your tallness, the red ecstasy of your mind." Her fingers slipped down the back of

his neck, playing little games with his flesh and hair. "I'll always love you, Ollie."

He kissed her savagely.

During the daytime, there was his work at the anthropological laboratories, the joy of poking among the cultures of the past. And at night there was the joy of living with her, of sharing the tantalizing stimulations of the culture of the present, the infinite varieties of love mingling with passions.

For months there was this happiness of the closeness of her. And then she was gone from him, for the moment. He still owned her, -but they were physically apart and there was the hunger of loneliness in him. The months his work kept them apart seemed like centuries, until, finally, he could return.

HE was walking through a happy, shouting crowd, walking back to her. It was the eve of the new year, a time for beginnings, a time for looking from the pleasures of the past to those waiting in the future. There was a happy outcry inside him that matched the mood of the crowd.

"Happy New Year!"

Women stopped him on the street, asking for his affection. But he passed them by, for she was waiting for him and he was

hungry for the possessive love of his slave.

He went eagerly into the building where they lived.

THE crowd was gone. A door was opening. The voice of his love, sudden, full of naked surprise, bleated at him. And another voice, that of a man standing behind her, croaked with hasty excuses and fear.

A change of hungers — it seemed no more complex than that.

He put his hand to his side and took out a piece of shaped metal, pointing it at the man. A blast of light and the man was dead. He put the weapon aside.

Young Oliver Symmes walked toward the girl. She backed away from him, pleading with words, eyes, body. He noticed for the first time the many small imperfections of her face and figure.

Cornered, she raised her arms to embrace him. He raised his arms to answer the embrace, but his hands stopped and felt their way around the whiteness of her neck. He pressed his hands together, thumbs tight against each other.

Minutes later, he dropped her to the floor and stood looking at her. He had owned her and then destroyed her when his ownership was in dispute.

He bent to kiss the lax lips.

SHADOWS. As a man grows older, the weight and size of his brain decrease, leaving cavities in his mind. The years that pass are a digger, a giant excavator, scooping the mass of past experience up in the maw of dissipation. The slow, sure evacuation of the passing decades leaves wing-room in a man's head for stirring memories.

The withered man looked up again. The woman in the green uniform was smiling at him through parted, almost twisted lips.

"I suppose that this time of year is the worst for you, isn't it?" she asked sympathetically. The first requirement of a good geriatrician was sympathy and understanding. She determined to try harder to understand.

The old man made no answer, only staring at her face. But his eyes were blank — seeing, yet blind to all around him. She frowned for a moment as she looked at him. The unnatural hairlessness of his body puzzled her, making it difficult for her to understand him while the thought was in her mind—that and the trouble she had getting through to him.

She stared at him as if to pierce the blankness of his gaze. Behind his eyes lay the emptiness of age, the open wound of stifled years.

"I'll move you over to the window, Mr. Symmes," she told him in soothing tones, her smile reappearing. "Then you can look out and see all the people. Won't that be fun?"

Picking up a box from the table, she adjusted a dial. The chair in which he was sitting rose slightly from the floor and positioned itself in front of the window. The woman walked to the wall beside him and corrected the visual index of the glass to match the weakness of the old man's eyes.

"See, down there? Just look at them pushing about."

A rabble of faces swam on the glass in front of him, faces of unfamiliar people, all of them unknown and unknowable to him.

Inside him the whisper of the wings mounted in pitch with a whining, leathery sound. The images of dead faces came flying up, careening across his mind, mingling and merging with the faces of the living. The glass became an anomalous torrent of faces.

Dead faces . . .

FOUR walls around him, bare to the point of boredom. Through the barred window, the throbbing throat of the crowd talked to him. His young body took it in, his young mind accepted it, catalogued it and pushed it out of consciousness.

And for each individual voice there was an individual face, staring up at his cell from the comparative safety of outside. Young Oliver Symmes could not see the faces from where he sat, waiting, but he could sense them.

There came a feel of hands on his shoulder; his reverie was interrupted. Arms under his raised him to his feet. A face smiled, almost kindly, in understanding.

"They're waiting for you, Mr. Symmes. It's time to go."

More words. Walking from this place to that, mostly with a crowd of people at his shoulders, pressing him in. Then a door ahead of him, ornate in carving, a replica of the doors to the Roman Palace of Justice many centuries before. Again his mind catalogued the impressions.

Then, like the faces of the people outside his cell, the pictures of the bas-relief faded away, melted and merged into a pelagic blackness.

The doors opened and, with part of the crowd still at his side, he went through. The people inside were standing; stick men, it seemed to him, with painted balloons for faces. The sound of the rapping of a gavel caught his ear. The people sat, and the trial began.

"This court will admit to evidence only those events and artifacts which are proved true and

relevant to the alleged crime."

An obsequious clearing of throats. A coughing now and then.

"... And did you see the defendant, Oliver Symmes, enter the apartment of the deceased on the night of the Thirty-first of December, two thousand and ..."

"I did. He was wearing a sort of orange tunic ..."

Someone whispered in his ear. Oliver Symmes heard and shook his head.

"... You are personally acquainted with the defendant?"

"I am. We worked for United Anthropological Laboratories before he ..."

"Objection."

"Sustained."

The blackness of the judge's robe puzzled him. A vestige, an anachronism, handed down from centuries before. White was the color of truth, not black.

"You swear that you found the defendant standing over the body of the deceased woman on the night of ..."

"Not standing, sir. He was bending over, kissing ..."

"Your witness."

DAYS of it, back and forth. testimony and more testimony. Evidence and more evidence and the lack of it. Smiling lawyers, grimacing lawyers, soothing lawyers and cackling

lawyers. And witnesses.

"You will please take the stand, Mr. Symmes."

He walked to the chair and sat down. The courtroom leaned forward, the stick men bowed toward him slightly, as in eager applause of the coming most dramatic moment of a spectacle.

"You will please tell the court in your own words ..."

He mouthed the words. The whole story, the New Year's crowd, his hunger for her, his arrival, the other man and his babbling, the woman and how she looked, his feelings, his transfigured passions, and the deaths. He told the story again and again until they seemed satisfied.

"You understand, Mr. Symmes, that you have committed a most heinous crime. You have killed two people in a passion that, while it used to be forgiven by the circumstances, is no longer tolerated by this government. You have killed, Mr. Symmes!"

The face before him was intense. He looked at it, not understanding the reason for the frozen look of malice and hatred.

"She was mine. When she betrayed me, I killed her. Is that wrong?"

The stick men snorted and poked each other in the ribs with derisive elbows.

There were more words and more questions. He looked at the

face of the judge and wondered, for a moment, if perhaps the color of the robe was to match the apparent disposition of the man.

And then came the silence, a time of sitting and waiting. He sensed the wondering stares of the stick men, wide-eyed in apprehension, suspended from the drabness of their own lives for the moment by the stark visitation of tragedy in his. They gabbled among themselves and wagered on the verdict.

The man next to him leaned over and tapped him on the arm. Everyone stood up and then, curiously, sat down again almost at once. He felt the tension present in the courtroom, but was strangely relaxed himself. It was peculiar that they were all so excited.

"Your Honor, having duly considered the seriousness of the crime and the evidence presented . . ."

The balloon faces on the stick men stretched in anticipation.

". . . taking full cognizance of the admitted passion on the part of the defendant and the circumstances . . ."

The balloons were strained, contorted out of all proportion in their eagerness.

". . . we find the defendant guilty of murder, making no recommendation for consideration by the Court."

The balloons exploded!

DEAFENING and more than deafening, the uproar of the voices was beyond belief. He threw his hands up over his ears to shut out the noise.

The gavel crashed again and again, striking the polished oak in deadly cadence, stifling the voices. Over the stillness, one man spoke. He recognized the black voice of the judge and took his hands from his ears and put them in his lap. He was told to stand and he obeyed.

"Oliver Symmes, there has been no taking of human lives in this nation for many years, until your shockingly primitive crime. We had taken pride in this record. Now you have broken it. We must not only punish you adequately and appropriately, but we must also make of your punishment a warning to anyone who would follow your irrational example.

"Naturally, we no longer have either the apparatus to execute anyone or an executioner. We do not believe that a stupidly unreasoning act should incite us to equally unreasoning reprisal, for we would then be as guilty of irrationality as you.

"We must establish our own precedent, since there is no recent one and the ancient punishments are not acceptable to us.

Therefore, because we are humane and reasoning persons, the Court orders that the defendant, Oliver Symmes, be placed in the National Hospital for observation, study and experimentation so that this crime may never again be repeated. He is to be kept there under perpetual care until no possible human skill or resource can further sustain life in his body."

Someone jumped erect beside him, quivering with horror and indignation. It was his lawyer.

"Your Honor, we throw ourselves upon the mercy of the Court. No matter what the crime of the defendant, this is a greater one. For this is a crime not just against my client, but against all men. This sentence robs all men of their most precious freedom—the right to die at their appointed times. Nothing is more damaging to the basic dignity of the human race than this most hideous . . ."

". . . This Court recognizes only the four freedoms. The freedom of death is not one of these. The sentence stands. The Court is adjourned."

There were tears in the eyes of his lawyer, although young Oliver Symmes did not quite comprehend, as yet, their meaning. Hands, rougher than before, grasped his arms with strange firmness and led him off into . . .

SHADOWS. They come in cycles, each prompted to activity by the one preceding it. They flutter in unbelievable clusters, wheel in untranslatable formations through the cerebriic wasteland that is the aged mind of Oliver Symmes. They have no meaning to him, save for a furtive spark of recognition that intrudes upon him once in a while.

The woman in the green uniform, standing to one side of the window, smiled at him again. It was much simpler to care for him, she thought, if only one conceived of him as being a sort of sweet little wornout teddy bear. Yes, that was what he was, a little teddy bear that had gotten most of its stuffing lost and had shriveled and shrunk. And one can easily love and pamper a teddy bear.

"Can you see the crowd all right, Mr. Symmes? This is a good place to watch from, isn't it?"

Her words fell upon his ears, setting up vibrations and oscillations in the basilar membranes. Nerve cells triggered impulses that sped along neural pathways to the withered cortex, where they lost themselves in the welter of atrophy and disintegration. They emerged into his consciousness as part of a gestaltic confusion.

"Isn't it exciting, watching

from here?" she asked, showing enthusiasm at the sight of the crowd below. "You should be enjoying this immensely, you know. Not all the people here have windows to look out of like this." There, now, that should make him feel a little better.

His eyes, in their wandering, came to rest upon her uniform, so cool and comforting in its greenness. A flicker of light gleamed from the metallic insignia on her sleeve: "To Care for the Aged." Somewhere inside him an association clicked, a brief fire of response to a past event kindled into a short-lived flame, lighting the way through cobwebs for another shadow . . .

HOW many years he had been waiting for the opportunity, he did not know. It seemed like decades, although it might have been only a handful of months. And all the time he had waited, he could feel himself growing older, could sense the syneresis, the slow solidifying of the life elements within him. He sat quietly and grew old, thinking the chance would never come.

But it did come, when he had least expected it.

It was a treat—his birthday. Because of it, they had given him actual food for the first time in years: a cake, conspicuous in its

barrenness of candles; a glass of real vegetable juices; a dab of potato; an indescribable green that might have been anything at all; and a little steak. A succulent, savory-looking piece of genuine meat.

The richness of the food would probably make him sick, so unaccustomed to solid food was his digestive tract by now, but it would be worth the pain.

And it was then that he saw the knife.

It lay there on the tray, its honed edge glittering in the light of the sun. A sharp knife, capable of cutting steak—or flesh of any kind.

"Well, how do you like your birthday present, Mr. Symmes?"

He looked up quickly at the woman standing beside the tray. The yellow pallor of her middle-aged skin matched the color of her uniform. She wore the insignia of a geriatrics supervisor.

He let a little smile flicker across his face. "Why, it's . . . it's wonderful. I never expected it at all. It's been so long, you know. So very long."

How could he get rid of her? If he tried anything with her watching, she would stop him. And then he'd never get another chance.

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Symmes. Synthetic foods do get

tiresome after a while, don't they?"

The idea came with suddenness and he responded to it quickly.

"But where are my pink pills? I always take them at lunch."

"You won't need them if you're eating real food."

He whipped his voice into petulance: "Yes, I will! I don't care if it is real food—I want my pills!"

"I'll get them for you later. Go ahead and eat first."

"I can't eat until I take my pink pills! You ought to know that! I won't touch a thing until I get them! You've ruined my birthday party."

The whims of the aging are without logic, so she went to get the pills, leaving Oliver Symmes and the gleaming, sharp knife together, unattended.

WHERE should he start? The heart? No, that would be too quick, too easy to repair. Then where?

He remembered his studies of the middle Japanese culture and the methods of suicide practiced at that time. The intestines! So many of them to cut and slash at, so much damage that might be done before death set in! May-be even the lungs! But he must hurry.

Picking up the knife, he point-

ed it as his appendix. For a moment he hesitated, and his eyes observed again the little feast laid out before him. He thought briefly about pausing for just a while to taste the little steak, to nibble briefly at the delectable-looking cake. He hated to leave it untouched. It had been such a long time . . .

The sudden memory of time, and how much of it he had spent hoping for this moment, snapped his attention back to the knife. Steeling his grip on it, he pressed it in hard.

His eyes bulged with the excruciating pain as he wrenched the knife from right to left, twisting it wildly as he went, blindly slashing at his vital organs with the hope that once and for all he could stop the long and eternal waiting.

His mouth filled with the taste of blood. He spat it out through clenched teeth. It gushed down his chin, staining the cleanness of his robe. His lips parted to scream.

And then his eyes closed.

AND opened again! He was staring at the ceiling, but the men and women standing around him got in his way.

Their lips were moving, their faces unperturbed.

"That was a nasty thing for him to do."

"They all do it, once or twice, until they learn."

"Third time for him, isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe so. First time he tried hanging himself. Second time he was beating his head against the wall when we came and stopped him. Bloody mess that one was."

"Nothing to compare with this, of course."

"Well, naturally."

Oliver Symmes felt sick with fear of frustration.

"Nice technique you showed, Doctor. He'd been dead at least an hour when we started, hadn't he?"

"Almost two," someone else said. "An amazing job."

"Thank you. But it wasn't too difficult. Just a little patching here and there."

He felt his legs being shifted for him.

"Be careful there, Nurse. Handle him gently. *Fragilitas Ossium*, you know. Old bones break very easily."

"Sorry, Doctor."

"Not that we couldn't fix them up immediately if they did."

"Naturally, Doctor."

"I wish they'd try something different for a change."

"The woman in the next room lost an eye last year, trying to reach the pre-frontals. Good as new now, of course."

He wanted to vomit at the use-

lessness of it all.

"By the way, what's he in for? Do you know?"

"No, I'd have to look it up."

"Probably newness."

"Or taxes."

"Or maybe even slander."

"Is that on the prescribed anti-social list now?"

"Oh, yes. It was passed just before the destructive criticism law."

"Think he'll try this messy business again?"

"They all do."

"They do, don't they? Don't they ever learn it's no use?"

"Eventually. Some are just harder to convince than others."

The pain was gone. He closed his eyes and slipped off into darkness again and into . . .

SHADOWS. In slow and ponderous fashion they float across the sea of his mind, like wandering bits of sargasso weed on the brackish water of a dying ocean. Each one dreamed a thousand times too many, each separate strand of memory-weed now nothing but a stereotyped shred of what might have once been a part of life and of living.

With the quietness of deserted ships they drift in procession past his sphere of consciousness. Wait! There's one that seems familiar. He stops the mental parade for a moment, not hearing

the voice of his companion, the woman in the green uniform.

"It's getting late, Mr. Symmes." She turned from the window and glanced at the wizenedness, the fragile remainder of the man, the almost empty shell. It was a pity he wasn't able to play games with her like some of the others. That made it so much easier. "Don't you think it's about time you went to bed? Early to bed and early to rise, you know."

That memory of a needle, pointed and gleaming. What was it?

Oh, yes. Stick it in his arm, push the plunger, pull it out; and wait for him to die. First one disease and then another, to each he happily succumbed, in the interests of science, only to be resuscitated. Each time a willing volunteer, an eager guinea pig, he had hoped for the ease of death, praying that for once they'd wait too long, the germs would prove too virulent, that something would go wrong.

"There, now, you just lie back and get comfortable," she said, walking over to the table. "But it has been fun, hasn't it? Watching the crowds, I mean." She felt he must be much happier now, and the knowledge of it gave her a sense of success. She was living up to her pledge, "To Care for the Aged."

Diabetes, tuberculosis, cancer of the stomach, tumor of the brain. He'd had them all, and many others. They had swarmed to him through the gouged skin-openings made by the gleaming needle. And each had brought the freedom of blackness, of death, sometimes for an hour, sometimes for a whole week. But always life returned again, and the waiting, waiting, waiting.

"I enjoy New Year's myself," the woman said, her hands caressing a dial. Slowly, with gentle undulation, his chair rose from the floor and cradled the aged tiredness that was Oliver Symmes to his bed. With almost tender devotion, his body was mechanically shifted from the portable chair to the freshly made bed.

ONE of his arms was caught for just a moment under the slight weight of his body. There was a short, snapping sound, but Oliver Symmes took no notice. His face remained impassive. Even pain had lost its meaning.

"It's a pity we couldn't have been outside with the rest of them, celebrating," she said, as she arranged the covers around him, not noticing the arm herself.

This was the part of her job she enjoyed most—tucking the nice little man into bed. He did look sweet there, under the cov-

ers, didn't he?

"Just imagine, Mr. Symmes, another year's gone by, and what have we accomplished?"

Her prattle seeped in and he became aware of it and what she was saying. New Year?

"What—what year—is this?" He spoke with great difficulty, from the long disuse of vocal cords. It was hardly more than a whisper, but she heard and was startled.

"Why, Mr. Symmes, it's been so long since you've talked." She paused, but realized that she had not answered his question.

"It's '73, of course. Last year was '72, so tonight's the start of '73."

'73? Had it been fifty years since he came here? Had it been just that long?

"What—" She leaned closer to him as he struggled for the word.

"What—century?"

Her astonishment was gone. He was teasing her, like the woman on the next level. These old ones were great for that!

"Now, Mr. Symmes, everybody knows what century it is." She smiled at him glowingly, thinking she had caught him at a prank. It was nice, she thought, to have gotten through to him tonight, on the eve of the new

year. That meant that she was living up to her motto the way she ought to be.

She'd have to tell the supervisor about it.

Oliver Symmes turned to face the ceiling, his mind full of dusty whispers. What century was it? She hadn't answered. It might have been a hundred and fifty years ago he came here, instead of just fifty. Or possibly two hundred and fifty, or . . .

"Now, you be good, and sleep tight, and I'll see you in the morning." Her hand passed over a glowing stud and the room light dimmed to a quiet glow. Lying there in the bed, he did look like a teddy bear, a dear little teddy bear. She was so happy.

"Good night, Mr. Symmes."

She closed the door.

OUTSIDE, bells were ringing. "Happy New Year."

The ceiling stared back at him. The mad sound of people crazed for the moment, shouting, echoed the bells.

"Happy New Year!"

He turned his head to one side.

"Happy New Year!"

And again . . . and again . . . and again.

—JAMES McCONNELL