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lost aurora

by . . . *Franklyn Roberts*

It was so wonderful to be home again. He could hardly contain his happiness as he gazed at the lilac tree. . .

THE dream had been shockingly vivid and David had trouble extricating himself from it. He lay in bed, straining his eyes in the dim room, trying to focus them upon the gray streaks of light that showed between the slats of the window blind. He was involved in two realities—the reassuring one of his bed and bedroom, and the nightmarish one of the plain and the mountains.

He was aware of the smooth cool sheets of the bed and the timid breath of the summer morning seeping through the window ventilator, and yet at the same time he was aware of the preposterous plain and the outrageous shapes of the distant mountains.

He seemed to be lying on the plain, facing the mountains. His body was supported by an unyielding object beneath his shoulders. Another, much larger object loomed beside him, an indeterminate object, tall and violently twisted. In the sky, harsh pinpointed stars glittered, shedding pitiless radiance upon the scene, turning the plain into a glistening shambles, transforming the mountains into glinting grotesques.

Franklyn Roberts returns, after much too long an absence, with this sensitive story of part of the price that Man will have to pay if he wants the Stars. Purists will perhaps question the description of this as SF—but this is to deny that—even Tomorrow—man will remember lost dreams.

He was without physical sensation. He could glimpse his bulky shapeless body but he had no kinesthetic awareness of it. While it was unquestionably his body, he had no contact with it, no relationship.

The dream was peculiar in other aspects. It did not progress. There was no movement—except the imperceptible movement of the stars—and yet there was a sense of time, a distorted cognizance of hours passing, a vague remembrance of other hours that had already passed—

David concentrated on the window, the familiar window with the first light of the morning filtering through its Venetian blind. After a long while the details of the bedroom began to assert themselves: the unforgettable slant of the hipped ceiling, the dim silhouette of his bed table piled with books, the gray blur of his chest of drawers, the dark mass of his antique rolltop desk; finally the pale expanse of the sheets and the remembered crescent of the foot of the bed.

Tentatively he got up and slipped into his summer clothing, moving softly so he would not awaken his mother and father. He went downstairs to the kitchen and put the teakettle on, and he washed in the kitchen sink while the water came to a boil; and while the water bubbled and gurgled in the dripolator he fried bacon and eggs, and made toast. Suddenly he remem-

bered the morning and he opened the kitchen door, and the morning tiptoed in, sweet and cool, and moist as a child's kiss.

It was so wonderful to be home again! David could hardly contain his happiness. Through the open door he could see the lilac tree laden with its mauve explosions of scented blooms, and the sweep of dew-drenched meadows with their scattered snowfalls of daisies; and beyond the meadows the lavender mistiness of the gently rising hills. He ate his breakfast hurriedly, not tasting it, then he went out into the morning. He followed the old path through the orchard, over the little rickety bridge that spanned the creek, past the blackberry patch and down to the country road. The road was damp and cool beneath its canopy of sugar maples, a long green tunnel of associations. He walked along it, fondling memories.

The mass melody of birds was all around him, accompanied now and then by the boisterous leitmotiv of an awakening rooster. He passed drowsy farmhouses dreaming in their green retreats of lawns and trees, familiar rural mailboxes standing one-legged by the roadside with their remembered stencilled names and their little metal arms that the postman raised when there was mail.

His heart began to pound when he neared the last house, when he saw the apple orchard and the pasture; the strawberry patch, and

then the neat lawn with its prim little islands of tulip beds and its disciplined spiraea. He knew why his heart was pounding, but he wouldn't admit the reason even to himself until he reached the white picket fence and looked up suddenly and saw Jo Ann standing by the gate.

A different Jo Ann—a mature Jo Ann in a white summer dress. Her awkwardness had absconded: her legs were rounded now, and long and graceful; her breasts full. And she was tall, almost as tall as he was, he saw when he came up to her.

Her bobbed hair was darker, a dark lustrous brown, and her freckles were gone. No, not quite. A few of them were still there—little nostalgic traces half hidden in her summer tan.

"I heard you were back," she said. "I've been waiting here, hoping you might come by."

"I'm so glad to see you, Jo."

He stood there quietly, looking into her eyes. The warm brightness had come into them, the way it used to before he had gone away. Seeing her eyes like that he wondered why he had ever gone away at all, how he ever could have gone away. But he had been much younger then, of course, just as she had been; they had been kids then, both of them, too young to know what love was all about.

It was different now. It was different, and yet in an intangible way it wasn't different at all. He took

her hand, the way he used to, and they started down the road together. And the road was the same as it had always been, and they were the same too, even though they were man and woman now, instead of boy and girl.

In a way everything had changed, and yet in another way nothing had changed at all. . . .

It was the time of the morning that David liked best, a phase of dawn that most people never saw at all—a haunting, evanescent phase. The light was gray, and yet it was pink too; part mist, part fragrance, soft, tenuous, unreal. It was all around him, filling the valley, turning the valley into a gentle place of pale shadows and diaphanous mists; of green pastures and still waters. And then, abruptly, it was gone; the lovely moment was over and the first rays of the sun were slanting brightly down from the hills.

When they reached the end of the road they struck off across the fields. The farm buildings dwindled slowly behind them, and the hills grew gradually taller, the deep green of forest and clearing showing upon their misted slopes.

David knew the valley intimately. He was acquainted with every rise and fall of ground, every clump of sumac, every isolated elm and sprawling oak. He told Jo Ann all the silly things he used to think about when he was a boy playing on the meadows; hunting,

fishing, climbing grassy hills; running in the summer wind. And she listened to his words quietly, smiling her soft understanding smile.

There were many things he didn't need to tell her—the things they had done together and had reciprocal thoughts about. When they came to the places they had shared there was no need to talk, and they walked silently side by side, glancing at each other and touching eyes.

He thought of how wonderful it was to be back. How marvelous it was to be walking hand in hand with his unforgettable childhood sweetheart, lightly leaping little meadow brooks, climbing pasture fences; pausing like mystified children before some strange flower, some odd twist of tree, some tiny impression in soft earth that only a leprechaun could have made — Walking and talking in low voices, seeing each other in quiet moments, alone in the morning, on the meadows, the lazy hills spread out before them, rising like green gigantic shoulders into the matchless summer sky.

Presently they came to the special creek that meandered across the valley floor beneath a serpentine canopy of willows. They found a shadowed place where the water ran clear and cold, and they sank down upon the grassy bank to rest. They removed their shoes, the way they used to do, and let the flashing water swirl round their feet. Then they lay lazily back and look-

ed up at the sky through the arabesques of willow leaves.

"I don't know why I went away," David said. "I can't understand why I went away."

"The valley was too small for you," Jo Ann said. "You had to go."

"I never stopped wanting to come back. Not once. I could never get the valley out of my mind. The valley the way it is on a summer morning, the way it is now—"

"Am I a part of it?"

"You're the most important part," David said. "Without you, the valley would be nothing. Without you, this wouldn't be morning at all. It would be—would be—"

He paused, concentrating. He closed his eyes for a moment. Abruptly, horribly, the plain rushed into focus, the plain and the distant fantastic mountains. And again he found himself lying in the midst of a glinting wasteland beside a tortured twisted shape which he could only half see and did not want to see at all; a shape that held frightful associations, that symbolized something he desperately wanted to forget.

His eyelids seemed to be cemented together. He could not raise them and yet, paradoxically, in one sense they were raised, and his eyes were fixed with terrible intensity upon the plain and the mountains, upon the cruel hating stars that glittered in the stygian sky.

He concentrated with his whole being. His eyelids weighed incal-

culable tons. Raising them was like raising the world, and yet when he finally did raise them he was not sure whether he had raised them at all. For an unreasonable moment he was sure that he had lowered them instead. But it did not matter really, because the lovely morning scene flowed back and the plain and the mountains faded away. And there above him were the delicate willow limbs and the little patches of sky showing through exquisite interstices; and there beside him was his glorious grown-up sweetheart.

"I don't know why I went away," he said again. "I must have forgotten about the morning. I must have forgotten about you."

"But you remembered us again."

"Yes," he said. He leaned back, pillowing his head upon her shoulder, being careful not to close his eyes. "I remembered . . . But not till after I went away. Not till it was almost too late. And I never should have forgotten in the first place. I never should have forgotten from the first moment on, the first morning, remember? When I carried your books from school."

"But you did."

"Yes . . . It seems crazy now. But I remembered for awhile. Till the stars started to get into my eyes and I couldn't see anything else, only in a distorted kind of way, a way that turned values upside down. A drunken way really, because I was drunk then, drunk with trajectories and escape veloci-

ties and Einsteinian space time. I was so drunk that I wanted to escape from the valley. From the morning. From you—"

"But you sobered up in time."

"Yes," he said. "I'm glad of that. But it took me so long. Think of all the mornings we've lost. All the sweet mornings, the irretrievable mornings—"

"We'll make up for them."

"Not all of them. We can never make up for all of them."

"We can try." She pulled her feet out of the water and slipped them, wet and glistening, into her sandals. "Come on," she said. "Let's not waste a minute of this one!"

David put his own shoes on abstractedly. A light wind had crept down from the hills and into the valley. There was a dreamy stir of branches, a gentle rippling of the tall timothy of the meadows. He breathed deeply, smelling the forest smell of the hills, the damp decayed smell; the living-dying smell of new life springing from the compost of old.

They left the creek and struck off across the fields again. The valley was washed in warm golden light.

They waded through tall drifts of daisies and climbed fences embroidered with wild morning glories. The hills crept closer. Finally they came to the beginning of the forest and they slipped into its fern-scented coolness. Birds

sang softly in the dappled fastnesses before them.

The ground rose gradually and David recognized the familiar contour of the first hill. He began to see the familiar forest places—the grapevine swings and the wild berry patches, the dwindling stands of locusts; the tall straight beech where once, long ago, he had carved the big awkward heart and laboriously inscribed the names "David" and "Jo Ann" within its asymmetrical boundaries. The vague outline of the heart was still there, and by looking closely and concentrating he was able to make out the names. They were on a level with his eyes, he noticed, and something in him shouted that that shouldn't be; that both he and the tree had grown during the years and that the heart and the names should have risen in proportion to the tree's growth, not his. The inscription should be high above his head now, not precisely on a level with his eyes.

But it wasn't high above his head at all. It was right there where he could see it conveniently, where he could look at it closely and make out its dimly remembered outlines— He turned quickly away and continued up the hill, Jo Ann walking quietly beside him. He reached out and took her hand, holding it tightly to assure himself of her reality. Her hand was cool and light, and she seemed to float along beside him, half ethereal, half real, beautiful and unbeliev-

able after all the lonely years without her. The sun, sifting down through the lacy forest foliage, splashed upon their heads and shoulders, and it was as though they were walking in golden rain, the rain falling soundlessly, forming bright puddles on the forest floor around them, accumulating in the clearings in warm golden ponds.

They found a place between two hills where the spongy ground was riotous with violets. David picked a small bouquet and fastened it in Jo Ann's hair. "To match your eyes," he said. The violets were lovely, but her eyes were lovelier still. He gazed into them wonderingly, seeing for the first time how deep they were, how infinitely deep; knowing, with sudden overwhelming conviction, that they contained the whole world. . . .

The valley sank farther and farther below them, visible now and then through delicate traceries of leaves and limbs. But David only glanced at it and then glanced away. He wanted to save it till the last. He wanted to save it till they breasted the highest hill and then look down and see it in all its auroral splendor, spread lavishly out below him just as he remembered it. Thinking of the valley made him happy. It was his valley in a way, now that he'd come back. In one sense he only owned a tiny corner of it, but in another sense he owned it completely. He promised himself that he would never

leave it again. "Never," he said aloud. "Never," he repeated. His voice sounded oddly muffled, far away and unreal.

The hills fell away below them, lost in the soft undulations of tree-tops. Halfway up the highest one they stopped to rest. Jo Ann sat with her back against a forest oak and David lay full length upon the ground, his head upon her lap, his eyes gazing up into her face.

Subtly, the scene shifted. It turned upside down, and suddenly he seemed to be looking down into a clear pool of water and seeing Jo Ann's reflection, slightly blurred, with great arches of branches showing deeply below it, and below the branches, at tremendous depth, the sky. Vertigo overcame him and he fought it desperately. He was careful not to close his eyes, but the dream returned anyway.

It was as though someone had cast a stone into the limpid pool. The reflected images went awry. They blurred and faded into meaningless distortions, and then the plain intruded itself, the plain and the distant mountains. The mountains were more distinct now, and he saw that they had abrupt shapes, as though they had just been formed, had just been squeezed up out of the ground and into the impassive sky, distorted in agony, twisted in infinite pain.

And then he became aware of the cold. He did not feel it. He *saw* it. He saw it in the stark clearness of the atmosphere, in the hard

iridescence of the plain, and in the glinting shapes of nearby outcroppings. And suddenly he realized that the plain was covered with snow, and that the outcroppings were upheavals of ice.

He became aware of something else, a phenomenon that had been absent before. There was a glow above the mountains, a silvery incandescence that intensified even as he watched, that reached out until it dominated the sky. And then, incredibly, the tip of a glittering silver lance rose slowly and magnificently above the peaks and stabbed into the stars.

He closed his eyes in anguish, and when he closed them in one sense he opened them in another. Jo Ann's face swam into focus, and then the background of motionless oak leaves and the deep perspective of sky. The stone had sunk to the bottom of the pool, out of sight beyond the stratosphere, and the pool was calm again, its images clear and steady.

He sat up slowly. The wooded hillside was spread out reassuringly all around him. The air was warm and pleasant, fragrant with a hundred forest scents, alive with a hundred forest sounds. He got to his feet and pulled Jo Ann up beside him. "Let's hurry," he said. "There isn't much time. And I want to see the valley. I've got to see the valley."

The hillside grew steep. They had to dig their feet into the earth and pull themselves upward by

branches and saplings. David felt the fluttering of his heart, the searing agony of his every breath. Jo Ann climbed gracefully, easily, her face cool and composed, more beautiful than he had ever seen it before.

When they were nearly to the summit he thought for a moment that he wasn't going to make it. The forest swam greenly around him, the blue sky patterns pinwheeled. For a moment he thought that he was going to slip back down the slope, go tumbling hopelessly down the hill. Then Jo Ann took his hand and new strength flowed into him, and suddenly there was the grass-covered shoulder of the hilltop and they were striding up its gentle contour into the sun.

They stood on the hilltop, against the sky, in the high, cool wind. "I love you, Jo Ann," David said. "I've always loved you. I never told you before. I waited too long to tell you . . ." He could see the valley clearly. It was a green-blue vastness below him—a vastness of fields and meadows and woodlands; of creeks and ponds and the shining ribbon of a river; of miniature houses nestling in green arbors, of the red bric-a-bracs of barns.

He saw the nostalgic curio of the country schoolhouse sitting on

its green shelf of lawn. In the distance the highway was a straight chalk line, and in the foreground the country roads were unpremeditated pencilings on verdant paper. The diffused light of the morning gave every detail a softness, a delicacy of contour, and the vivid blueness of the morning sky above the opposite line of hills lent a final flourish to the meticulous mental picture.

Then, subtly, the colors began to melt. The blueness of the sky began to sag, to run in blue blobs down into the greenness of the valley, smearing the exquisite details of houses and fields and roads and trees. And where the blueness of the sky had been the distorted mountains began to show, and then the plain. And finally the hills themselves dissolved, and Jo Ann flew away, and he lay all alone on the plain, propped against his air tanks, his body turning to ice in his heat-exhausted suit, his broken ship rising like an ironic tombstone beside him.

And he knew, in the last lucid moment, lying there watching the edge of Saturn's rings stab Titan's forsaken sky, that morning is a part of the price you have to pay if you want the stars, and that the only time spacemen ever go home to their childhood sweethearts is in their dying dreams.