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Somewhere, somehow, they'd bungled—or perhaps a bright child was too smart for them, whatever they did. The reason was no longer important; now, it was the fact that Johnny had found what they'd worked so hard to conceal from him—and Johnny was afraid...



NIGHT-FEAR

by Frank Belknap Long

{Illustrated by Don Sibley}



JN THE big house, upstairs, a child was sobbing. Dr. Brannon could hear the sobs from the foot of the stairs, and his nearsighted eyes grew troubled. It was more than he could understand.

Johnny wasn't a maladjusted youngster, starved for sympathy and affection; he was a perfectly normal seven-year-old, fond of games and well-liked by his playmates. A self-reliant, confident lad, even if he did have a way of smiling which made him seem wise beyond his years, at times.

Dr. Brannon tried hard to swallow

his fear as he climbed the stairs. For the first time in ten years he felt really old—wearily and baffled and old. He found himself thinking of Johnny's pretty young mother, and how hard she had tried to spare her son the loneliness and dread which had cast a shadow on her own childhood.

Even unto the third generation, he thought, and for an instant bitterness tightened his lips and drove the gentleness from his eyes. Why should a child playing with other children in the warm, bright sunlight feel a sudden, terrifying sense of insecurity? What could have darkened the sunlight for him, and undermined his confidence in himself?

Dr. Brannon glanced nervously at

his watch. Try as he might, he could not rid his mind of the alarming, hour-old memory of a laughing, healthy child eclipsed by a white-faced stranger with tormented eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

Psychologists were always harping on the almost-miraculous sanity of childhood, its freedom from morbidity, its joyous acceptance of life as a shining, untarnished coin. How blind they were not to realize that children were at the mercy of night-fears—great, shadowy-winged creatures which could inflict cruel wounds, and go flapping off into the darkness, leaving their small, terrified victims in full flight from reality on a plane incomprehensible to adults.

It is always a trying moment when an elderly physician must win the confidence of a young patient by absolutely untried methods. Dr. Brannon could still hear himself asking: "What frightened you, Johnny? Did you talk it over with the other children? Is that why you're so frightened?"

He might as well have saved his breath. Johnny hadn't wanted sympathy of a wheezing, red-faced old fool of a doctor.

The door of Johnny's room was ajar. Dr. Brannon could hear Johnny's mother moving about and making a difficult situation worse by talking to her son as if he were still a tot of three with a stubborn streak, and a bad case of sulks.

With an impatient grimace, he stepped into the room, and shut the door quickly behind him. "Well, Johnny, how do you feel now?" he asked. "Don't you think we'd better have another little talk—man to man?"

Johnny's mother ceased rearranging the pillows at her son's back and straightened with a sigh that was half a sob, the bedside lamp casting a circle of radiance about her pale hair.

"I'm sure he'll talk to me now," Dr. Brannon said, conscious of a faint irritation with the woman for being so

beautiful seven years after the death of her husband. Somehow the mother of an ailing child who was not a little worn-looking grated obscurely on his sense of propriety.

In utter silence he drew up a chair, sat down and looked at the lad on the bed over the top of his spectacles. He saw Johnny's face as a misty oval, the eyes darkly shining.

He coughed and adjusted his glasses. Seeing Johnny's face clearly, he felt a curious helplessness which his reason could not justify. Surely Johnny wasn't beyond help; he wasn't physically ill, or running a fever. His mother had perhaps unwisely put him to bed, and pulled down the shades, leaving him for a full hour in deep darkness. Naurally he would be blinking now, and confused, and resentful. He couldn't possibly be as tormented as he looked, as inwardly beyond hope of rescue.

DR. BRANNON hitched his chair nearer to the bed, and the smile that came to his face was slow and friendly. "If you were away at school I could understand your not wanting to talk about it," he said. "Strangers might not know what a brave lad you really are. But *I know*, Johnny. Surely you can talk freely to an old friend in your own home!"

For an instant Johnny drew back as if in secret pain. Then, abruptly, he leaned forward, his eyes accusing, his hands tightly clenched. "This *isn't* my home!" he said, and his voice seemed no longer the voice of a child, but that of some aging wanderer, shaken by despair and wretchedness.

Dr. Brannon stared for a long moment into the bewildered, angry eyes in shocked disbelief. Then his lips tightened, and he said in a voice that was almost a whisper: "So you've found that out at last, lad!"

Johnny's mother straightened as if stung by a hornet. "How could he find

out?" she breathed. "None of the other children knew."

"How did you find out, Johnny?" Dr. Brannon asked.

Johnny shook his head, then looked away quickly.

"All right, Johnny," Dr. Brannon said, gently. "Keep it to yourself, if you wish."

He turned around to face Johnny's mother. "You can't keep secrets from some youngsters," he said. "You just can't, that's all. It's as great a folly as trying to hide a jam-pot on a high shelf. Most likely the other children knew just enough to enable him to put two and two together."

Dr. Brannon took his spectacles and blew upon them. "Children's minds are tricky. When a lad like Johnny puts two and two together he'll come up with a figure that cuts across all mathematical boundaries. Not four, mind you, but a figure that cuts much closer to the truth."

Johnny's mother sat down on the side of the bed, put her arm around him and kissed him. "Johnny—" she whispered.

Dr. Brannon's eyes had a glint that might have been compassion or amusement—or both. "Your mother's here, Johnny," he said. "Doesn't that make it your home?"

"No, it doesn't."

"You're afraid, lad—is that it? For the first time in your life, you feel lost and afraid and alone?"

There was a quick, answering look of torment in Johnny's eyes.

Good lad, Dr. Brannon thought. Someday, Johnny, you'll answer all the well-meaning questions fearlessly. It's the only way we can give and receive help in the loneliness and the darkness.

Dr. Brannon pushed back his chair, and stood up. "I'm going to prove to you that you have a home, Johnny," he said. "There's something you've got to face, and we're going to face it together."

At the door he paused to speak to

Johnny's mother. "Get him ready," he said. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

WHEN DR. BRANNON returned Johnny was ready. If Dr. Brannon had moved wearily before he now seemed to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders. "All right, lad," he said. "We may as well get going."

Dr. Brannon took Johnny by the hand, and together they descended the stairs of the big, silent house, moving slowly and awkwardly. Then out across a sun-drenched playroom they went, and down a long sloping corridor with shining walls.

Doors opened at their approach with an eerie droning, and closed noiselessly behind them. Five doors with winking lights, and then they were in another corridor which was almost a tunnel, and a cold wind seemed to blow upon them.

At the end of the corridor they halted, and Dr. Brannon said: "You were born here, Johnny. For all the years of your life, this has been your home. A good home, Johnny, a home to be proud of. I was not born here, but the sunlight up above is as warm and bright as the sunlight I knew as a child."

"It's not real sunlight," Johnny said.

"No, of course not; but it's just as healthful. You see, lad, even now we who should be strong and self-reliant sometimes become frightened. We let ourselves become frightened, and it is very foolish."

Dr. Brannon pressed Johnny's hand. "We thought we could protect you from the cold and the dark—to keep you from feeling lost and afraid for the few happy years before eight. We of an old generation had a less-secure childhood."

Dr. Brannon scratched his ear. "I'm afraid we were not too successful; you were too smart for us. Youngsters really know how to cut corners to get at the truth, and when they do—" He

smiled. "There's a fine kettle of fish to unboil, lad!"

Dr. Brannon tightened his grip on Johnny's hand. "So now for the first time you'll see your home as it really is. I'll tell you how it became your home, and you'll be proud—you'll be so very proud of the men who gave their lives to make it your home—you'll forget to be afraid.

"Now remember what I told you. That spacesuit is heavy and weighs you down. But away from the station's artificial gravity, you'll be as spry as a harvest mouse in a field of summer corn."

Dr. Brannon pressed a button and there was a steady, humming sound.

Dr. Brannon said slowly: "Now put on your oxygen-helmet, lad. That's right; just let it settle gently on your shoulders, the way your father did when the Earth was forever behind him, and he walked from the rocket with the courage of a true pioneer."

For a moment Dr. Brannon seemed to grow in stature, as if the bracing of his shoulders had added a cubit to his height. Then the airlock swung open, and the man and the boy walked forward together, and emerged hand in hand on the cold, dark surface of the moon.

