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Short Novel

Trade Secret *Raymond F. Jones* 10

Novelette

Earthman, Come Home *James Blish* 86

Short Stories

The Happiness Effect *Raymond E. Banks* 57

Potential *Robert Sheckley* 72

The Sharpies *John Murphy* 134

Article

The Logical Parallax *Dr. Gotthard Gunther* 123

Readers' Departments

Window To Tomorrow 6

The Editor's Page 8

The Analytical Laboratory 85

In Times To Come 133

The Reference Library *P. Schuyler Miller* 143

Brass Tacks 153

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POTENTIAL BY ROBERT SHECKLEY



He was one man, horribly confused, escaping from a destroyed planet, carrying some sort of message which he couldn't recall. But he had tremendous potential for achievement!

Illustrated by A. Sussman

He returned to consciousness slowly, aware of aches and bruises, and an agonizing knot in his stomach. Experimentally, he stretched his legs.

They didn't touch anything, and he realized that his body was unsupported. He was dead, he thought. Floating free in space—

Floating? He opened his eyes. Yes, he was floating. Above him was a ceiling—or was it a floor? He resisted a strong urge to scream; blinked, and his surroundings swam into focus.

He realized that he was in a spaceship. The cabin was a shambles. Boxes

and equipment drifted around him, evidently ripped loose from their moorings by some sudden strain. Burnt-out wires ran across the floor. A row of lockers along one wall had been fused into slag.

He stared, but no recognition came. As far as he knew, he was seeing this for the first time. He raised a hand and pushed against the ceiling, drifted down, pushed again, and managed to grasp a wall rail. Holding this tightly, he tried to think.

"There is a logical explanation for all this," he said aloud, just to hear his own voice. "All I have to do is remember." Remember—

What was his name?

He didn't know.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Is there anyone here?" His words echoed between the ship's narrow walls. There was no answer.

He propelled himself across the cabin, ducking to miss the floating boxes. In half an hour he knew he was the only person aboard the ship.

He pushed himself back to the front of the ship. There was a padded chair there, with a long panel in front of it. He strapped himself into the chair and studied the panel.

It consisted of two blank screens,

one much larger than the other. Under the large screen were two buttons, marked *vision-front*, and *vision-back*. A dial beneath the buttons was calibrated for focus. The small screen was unmarked.

Not finding any other controls, he pushed the *vision-front* button. The screen cleared, showing black space with the brilliant points of the stars before him. He stared at it for a long time, open-mouthed, then turned away.

The first thing to do, he told himself, was to assemble all the knowledge at his disposal and see what he could deduce from it.

"I am a man," he said. "I am in a spaceship, in space. I know what stars are, and what planets are. Let me see—" He had a rudimentary knowledge of astronomy, less of physics and chemistry. He remembered some English literature, although he couldn't think of any writers except Traudzel, a popular novelist. He remembered the authors of several history books, but couldn't place their contents.

He knew the name for what he had: Amnesia.

Suddenly, he had a great desire to see himself, to look at his own face. Surely, recognition and memory would follow. He shoved himself across the room again, and started searching for a mirror.

There were lockers built into the walls, and he opened them hastily, spilling the contents into the weight-

less air. In the third locker he found a shaving kit and a small steel mirror. He studied the reflection anxiously.

A long irregular face, drained of color. Dark stubble growing on the chin. Bloodless lips.

The face of a stranger.

He fought down fresh panic and searched the cabin, looking for some clue to his identity. Quickly he pawed through the floating boxes, shoving them aside when they proved to contain nothing but food or water. He looked on.

Floating in one corner of the cabin was a sheet of scorched paper. He seized it.

"Dear Ran," it began. "The biochem boys have been doing some hurry-hurry last-minute checking on the pento. Seems there's a strong chance it might induce amnesia. Something about the strength of the drug, plus the near-traumatic experience you're undergoing, whether you're aware of it or not. *Now* they tell us! Anyhow, I'm dashing off this note at zero minus fourteen minutes, just as a refresher for you in case they're right.

"First, don't look for any controls. Everything's automatic, or it should be if this pile of cardboard and glue holds together. (Don't blame the technicians; they had practically no time to get it finished and away before flash moment).

"Your course is set for automatic

planetary selection, so just sit tight. I don't suppose you could forget Marselli's theorem, but in case you have, don't worry about landing among some eighteen-headed intelligent centipedes. You'll reach humanoid life because it *has* to be humanoid life.

"You may be a bit battered after blastoff, but the pento will pull you through. If the cabin is messy, it's because we just didn't have time to check everything for stress-strain tolerances.

"Now for the mission. Go at once to Projector One in Locker Fifteen. The projector is set for self-destruction after one viewing, so make sure you understand it. The mission is of ultimate importance. Doc, and every man and woman on Earth is with you. Don't let us down."

Someone named Fred Anderson had signed it.

Ran—automatically using the name given in the letter—started looking for Locker Fifteen. He found at once where it had been. Lockers Eleven through Twenty-five were fused and melted. Their contents were destroyed.

That was that. Only the scorched paper linked him now with his past, his friends, all Earth. Even though his memory was gone, it was a relief to know that the amnesia had an explanation.

But what did it mean? Why had they thrown the ship together in such a rush? Why had they placed him in it—alone—and sent him out? And

this all-important mission—if it was so vital, why hadn't they safeguarded it better?

The note raised more questions than it answered. Frowning, Ran pushed himself back to the panel. He looked out the screen again, at the spectacle of the stars, trying to reason it out.

Perhaps there was a disease. He was the only person not infected. They had built the ship and shot him out to space. The mission? To contact another planet, find an antidote, and bring it back—

Ridiculous.

He looked over the panel again, and pushed the button for *vision-rear*.

And almost fainted.

A glaring, blinding light filled the entire screen, scorching his eyes. Hastily he cut down the field of focus, until he was able to make out what it was.

A nova. And the letter had mentioned the flash-moment.

Ran knew that Sol was the nova. And that Earth was consumed.

There was no clock on the ship, so Dr. Ran had no idea how long he had been traveling. For a long time he just drifted around dazed, coming back to the screen constantly.

The nova dwindled as the ship speeded on.

Ran ate and slept. He wandered around the ship, examining, searching. The floating boxes were in the

way, so he started to pull them down and secure them.

Days might have passed, or weeks.

After a while, Ran started to put the facts he knew into a coherent structure. There were gaps and questions in it, probably untruths as well, but it was a beginning.

He had been chosen to go in the spaceship. Not as a pilot, since the ship was automatic, but for some other reason. The letter had called him "doc". It might have something to do with his being a doctor.

Doctor of what? He didn't know.

The makers of the ship had known Sol was going nova. They couldn't, evidently, rescue any sizable portion of Earth's population. Instead, they had sacrificed themselves and everyone else to make sure of rescuing him.

Why him?

He was expected to do a job of the greatest importance. So important that everyone had been subordinated to it. So important that the destruction of Earth itself seemed secondary, as long as the mission was accomplished.

What could that mission be?

Dr. Ran couldn't conceive of anything so important. But he had no other theory that came even close to fitting the facts as he knew them.

He tried to attack the problem from another viewpoint. What would he do, he asked himself, if he knew that Sol was going nova in a short time, and he could rescue only a limited number of

people with a certainty of success?

He would have sent out couples, at least one couple, in an attempt to perpetuate human stock.

But evidently the leaders of Earth hadn't seen it that way.

After a time, the small screen flashed into life. It read: *Planet. Contact 100 hours.*

He sat in front of the panel and watched. After a long time the digits changed. *Contact 99 hours.*

He had plenty of time. He ate, and went back to work getting the ship into what order he could.

While he was storing boxes in the remaining lockers, he found a carefully packaged and fastened machine. He recognized it as a projector at once. On its side was engraved a large "2".

A spare, he thought, his heart pounding violently. Why hadn't he thought of that? He looked into the viewer and pushed the button.

The film took over an hour. It started with a poetic survey of Earth; flashes of her cities, fields, forests, rivers, oceans. Her people, her animals, all in brief vignettes. There was no sound track.

The camera moved to an observatory, explaining its purpose visually. It showed the discovery of the Sun's instability, the faces of the astrophysicists who discovered it.

Then the race against time began, and the rapid growth of the ship. He saw himself, running up to it, grinning

at the camera, shaking someone's hand, and disappearing inside. The film stopped there. They must have stored the camera, given him the injection, and sent him off.

Another reel started.

"Hello, Ran," a voice said. The picture showed a large, calm man in a business suit. He looked directly at Ran out of the screen.

"I couldn't resist this opportunity to speak to you again, Dr. Ellis. You're deep in space now, and you've undoubtedly seen the nova that has consumed Earth. You're lonely, I daresay.

"Don't be, Ran. As representative of Earth's peoples, I'm taking this final chance to wish you luck in your great mission. I don't have to tell you that we're all with you. Don't feel alone."

"You have, of course, seen the film in Projector One, and have a thorough understanding of your mission. This portion of film—with my face and voice on it—will be automatically destroyed, in the same way. Naturally, we can't let extraterrestrials in on our little secret yet.

"They'll find out soon enough. You can feel free to explain anything on the remainder of this film to them. It should win you plenty of sympathy. Make no reference, of course, to the great discovery or the techniques that stemmed from it. If they want the faster-than-light drive, tell them the truth—that you don't know how it's

propagated, since it was developed only a year or so before Sol went nova. Tell them that any tampering with the ship will cause the engines to dissolve.

"Good luck, doctor. And good hunting." The face faded and the machine hummed louder, destroying the last reel.

He put the projector carefully back in its case, tied it into the locker, and went back to the control pane.

The screen read: *Contact 97 hours.*

He sat down and tried to place the new facts into his structure. As background, he remembered vaguely the great, peaceful civilization of Earth. They had been almost ready to go for the stars when the Sun's instability was found. The faster-than-light drive had been developed too late.

Against that background he had been selected to man the escape ship. Only him, for some unfathomable reason. The job given him was thought more important, evidently, than any attempts at race-survival.

He was to make contact with intelligent life, and tell them about Earth. But he was to withhold any mention of the greatest discovery and its resulting techniques.

Whatever they were.

And then he was to perform his mission—

He felt as though he could burst. He couldn't remember. *Why* hadn't the fools engraved his instructions on bronze?

What could it be?

The screen read, *Contact 96 hours.*

Dr. Ran Ellis strapped himself into the pilot chair and cried from sheer frustration.

The great ship looked, probed and reported. The small screen flashed into life. *Atmosphere-chlorine. Life-nonexistent.* The data was fed to the ship's selectors. Circuits closed, other circuits opened. A new course was set up, and the ship speeded on.

Dr. Ellis ate and slept and thought.

Another planet was reported, examined and rejected.

Dr. Ellis continued thinking, and made one unimportant discovery.

He had a photographic memory. He discovered this by thinking back over the film. He could remember every detail of the hour-long spectacle, every face, every movement.

He tested himself as the ship went on, and found that the ability was a constant. It worried him for a while, until he realized that it was probably a factor in his selection. A photographic memory would be quite an asset in learning a new language.

Quite an irony, he thought. Perfect retention—but no memory.

A third planet was rejected.

Ellis outlined the possibilities he could think of, in an effort to discover the nature of his mission.

To erect a shrine to Earth? Possibly. But why the urgency, then, the stressed importance?

Perhaps he was sent out as a teacher. Earth's last gesture, to instruct some inhabited planet in the ways of peace and co-operation.

Why send a doctor on a job like that? Besides, it was illogical. People learn over millennia, not in a few years. And it just didn't fit the mood of the two messages. Both the man in the film and the note-writer had seemed practical men. It was impossible to think of either of them as altruists.

A fourth planet came into range, was checked and left behind.

And what, he wondered, was the "great discovery"? If not the faster-than-light drive, what could it be? More than likely a philosophical discovery. The way man could live in peace, or something like that.

Then why wasn't he supposed to mention it?

A screen flashed, showing the oxygen content of the fifth planet. Ellis ignored it, then looked up as generators deep in the body of the ship hummed into life.

Prepare for landing, the screen told him.

His heart leaped convulsively, and Ellis had a momentary difficulty breathing.

This was it. A terror filled him as gravitation tugged at the ship. He fought it, but the terror increased. He screamed and tore at his straps as the ship started to go perceptibly down.

On the big screen was the blue and

green of an oxygen planet.

Then Ellis remembered something. "The emergence from deep space into a planetary system is analogous to the emergent birth-trauma." A common reaction, he told himself, but an easily controllable one for a psychiatrist—

A psychiatrist!

Dr. Randolph Ellis, psychiatrist. He knew what kind of doctor he was. He searched his mind for more information, fruitlessly. That was as far as it went.

Why had Earth sent a psychiatrist into space?

He blacked out as the ship screamed into the atmosphere.

Ellis recovered almost at once as the ship landed itself. Unstrapping, he switched on the vision-ports. There were vehicles coming toward the ship, filled with people.

Human-appearing people.

He had to make a decision now, one that would affect the rest of his time on this planet. What was he going to do? What would his course of action be?

Ellis thought for a moment, then decided he would have to play by ear. He would extemporize. No communication would be possible until he had learned the language. After that, he would say that he was sent from Earth to . . . to—

What?

He would decide when the time came. Glancing at the screens, he saw

that the atmosphere was breathable.

The side of the ship swung open, and Ellis walked out.

He had landed on a subcontinent called Krel, and the inhabitants were Krelans. Politically, the planet had reached the world-government stage, but so recently that the inhabitants still were identified with the older political divisions.

With his photographic memory Ellis found no difficulty learning the Krelan language, once a common basis had been established for key words. The people, of the common root Man, seemed no more foreign than some members of his own race. Ellis knew that this eventuality had been predicted. The ship would have rejected any other. The more he thought of it, the more he was certain that the mission depended on this similarity.

Ellis learned and observed, and thought. He was due, as soon as he had mastered the tongue sufficiently, to meet the ruling council. This was a meeting he dreaded, and put off as long as he could.

Nevertheless, the time came.

He was ushered through the halls of the Council Building, to the door of the Main Council Room. He walked in with the projector under his arm.

"You are most welcome, sir," the leader of the council said. Ellis returned the salutation and presented his films. There was no discussion

until everyone had seen them.

"Then you are the last representative of your race?" the council leader asked. Ellis nodded, looking at the kindly, seamed old face.

"Why did your people send only you?" another council member asked. "Why weren't a man and woman sent?" The same question, Ellis thought, that I've been asking myself.

"It would be impossible," he told them, "for me to explain the psychology of my race in a few words. Our decision was contained in our very sense of being." A meaningless lie, he thought to himself. But what else could he say?

"You will have to explain the psychology of your race sometime," the man said.

Ellis nodded, looking over the faces of the council. He was able to estimate the effect of the beautifully prepared film on them; they were going to be pleasant to this last representative of a great race.

"We are very interested in your faster-than-light drive," another council member said. "Could you help us attain that?"

"I'm afraid not," Ellis said. From what he had learned, he knew that their technology was pre-atomic, several centuries behind Earth's.

"I am not a scientist. I have no knowledge of the drive. It was a late development."

"We could examine it ourselves," a man said.

"I don't think that would be wise," Ellis told him. "My people consider it inadvisable to give a planet technological products beyond their present level of attainment." So much for theory. "The engines will overload if tampered with."

"You say you are not a scientist," the old leader asked pleasantly, changing the subject. "If I may ask, what are you?"

"A psychiatrist," Ellis said.

They talked for hours. Ellis dodged and faked and invented, trying to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. The council wanted to know about all phases of life on Earth, all the details of technological and social advances. They wondered about Earth's method of pre-nova detection. And why had he decided to come here? And finally, in view of coming alone, was his race suicidally inclined?

"We will wish to ask you more in the future," the old council leader said, ending the session.

"I shall be happy to answer anything in my power," Ellis said.

"That doesn't seem to be much," a member said.

"Now Elgg—remember the shock this man has been through," the council leader said. "His entire race has been destroyed. I do not believe we are being hospitable." He turned to Ellis.

"Sir, you have helped us immeasurably as it is. For example, now that

we know the possibility of controlled atomic power, we can direct research toward that goal. Of course, you will be reimbursed by the state. What would you like to do?"

Ellis hesitated, wondering what he should say.

"Would you like to head a museum project for Earth? A monument to your great people?"

Was that his mission, Ellis wondered? He shook his head.

"I am a doctor, sir. A psychiatrist. Perhaps I could help in that respect."

"But you don't know our people," the old leader said concernedly. "It would take you a lifetime to learn the nature of our tensions and problems. To learn them in sufficient intimacy to enable you to practice."

"True," Ellis said. "But our races *are* alike. Our civilizations have taken like courses. Since I represent a more advanced psychological tradition, my methods might be of help to your doctors—"

"Of course, Dr. Ellis. I must not make the mistake of underestimating a species that has crossed the stars." The old leader smiled ruefully. "I myself will introduce you to the head of one of our hospitals." The leader stood up.

"If you will come with me."

Ellis followed, with his heart pounding. His mission must have something to do with psychiatry. Why else send a psychiatrist?

But he still didn't know what he

was supposed to do.

And, to make it worse, he could remember practically none of his psychiatric background.

"I think that takes care of all the testing apparatus," the doctor said, looking at Ellis from behind steel-rimmed glasses. He was young, moon-faced, and eager to learn from the older civilization of Earth.

"Can you suggest any improvements?" he asked.

"I'll have to look over the setup more closely," Ellis said, following the doctor down a long, pale-blue corridor. The testing apparatus had struck a complete blank.

"I don't have to tell you how eager I am for this opportunity," the doctor said. "I have no doubt that you Terrans were able to discover many of the secrets of the mind."

"Oh, yes," Ellis said.

"Down this way we have the wards," the doctor said. "Would you care to see them?"

"Fine." Ellis followed the doctor, biting his lip angrily. His memory was still gone. He had no more psychiatric knowledge than a poorly informed layman. Unless something happened soon, he would be forced to admit his amnesia.

"In this room," the doctor said, "we have several quiet cases." Ellis followed him in, and looked at the dull, lifeless faces of three patients.

"Catatonic," the doctor said, point-

ing to the first man. "I don't suppose you have a cure for that?" He smiled good-naturedly.

Ellis didn't answer. Another memory had popped into his mind. It was just a few lines of conversation.

"But is it ethical?" he had asked. In a room like this, on Earth.

"Of course," someone has answered. "We won't tamper with the normals. But the idiots, the criminally insane—the psychotics who could never use their minds anyhow—it isn't as though we were robbing them of anything. It's a mercy, really—"

Just that much. He didn't know to whom he had been talking. Another doctor, probably. They had been discussing some new method of dealing with defectives. A new cure? It seemed possible. A drastic one, from the content.

"Have you found a cure for it?" the moon-faced doctor asked again.

"Yes. Yes, we have," Ellis said, taking his nerve in both hands. The doctor stepped back and stared.

"But you couldn't! You can't repair a brain where there's organic damage—deterioration, or lack of development—" He checked himself.

"But listen to *me*, telling *you*. Go ahead, doctor."

Ellis looked at the man in the first bed. "Get me some assistants, doctor." The doctor hesitated, then hurried out of the room.

Ellis bent over the catatonic and looked at his face. He wasn't sure

of what he was doing, but he reached out and touched the man's forehead with his finger.

Something in Ellis' mind clicked.

The catatonic collapsed.

Ellis waited, but nothing seemed to be happening. He walked over to the second patient and repeated the operation.

That one collapsed also, and the one after him.

The doctor came back, with two wide-eyed helpers. "What's happening here?" he asked. "What have you done?"

"I don't know if our methods will work on your people," Ellis bluffed. "Please leave me alone—completely alone for a little while. The concentration necessary—" He turned back to the patients.

The doctor started to say something, changed his mind and left quietly, taking the assistants with him.

Sweating, Ellis examined the pulse of the first man. It was still beating. He straightened and started to pace the room.

He had a power of some sort. He could knock a psychotic flat on his back. Fine. Nerves—connections. He wished he could remember how many nerve connections there were in the human brain. Some fantastic number; Ten to the twenty-fifth to the tenth? No, that didn't seem right. But a fantastic number.

What did it matter? It mattered, he was certain.

The first man groaned and sat up. Ellis walked over to him. The man felt his head, and groaned again.

His own personal shock-therapy, Ellis thought. Perhaps Earth had discovered the answer to insanity. As a last gift to the universe, they had sent him out, to heal—

"How do you feel?" he asked the patient.

"Not bad," the man answered—in English!

"What did you say?" Ellis gasped. He wondered if there had been a thought-transfer of some sort. Had he given the man his own grasp of English? Let's see, if you reshunted the load from the damaged nerves to unused ones—

"I feel fine, Doc. Good work. We weren't sure if that haywire and cardboard ship would hold together, but as I told you, it was the best we could do under the—"

"Who are you?"

The man climbed out of bed and looked around.

"Are the natives gone?"

"Yes."

"I'm Haines, Representative of Earth. What's the matter with you, Ellis?"

The other men were reviving now.

"And they—"

"Dr. Clitell."

"Fred Anderson."

The man who called himself Haines

looked over his body carefully. "You might have found a better host for me, Ellis. For old time's sake. But no matter. What's the matter, man?"

Ellis explained about his amnesia.

"Didn't you get the note?"

Ellis told them everything.

"We'll get your memory back, don't worry," Haines said. "It feels good to have a body again. Hold it."

The door opened and the young doctor peered in. He saw the patients and let out a shout.

"You did it! You are able—"

"Please, doctor," Ellis snapped.

"No sudden noises. I must ask not to be disturbed for at least another hour."

"Of course," the doctor said respectfully, withdrew his face and closed the door.

"How was it possible?" Ellis asked, looking at the three men. "I don't understand—"

"The great discovery," Haines said.

"Surely you remember that? You worked on it. No? Explain, Anderson."

The third man walked over slowly. Ellis noticed that the vacuous faces were beginning to tighten already, shaped by the minds in back of them.

"Don't you remember, Ellis, the research on personality factors?"

Ellis shook his head.

"You were looking for the lowest common denominator of human-life-and-personality. The source, if you wish. The research actually started

almost a hundred years ago, after Orgell found that personality was independent of body, although influenced and modified by it. Remember now?"

"No. Go on."

"To keep it simple, you—and about thirty others—found that the lowest indivisible unit of personality was an independent nonmaterial substance. You named it the M molecule. It is a complex mental pattern."

"Mental?"

"Nonmaterial, then," Anderson said. "It can be transferred from host to host."

"Sounds like possession," Ellis said.

Anderson, noticing a mirror in a corner of the room, walked over to examine his new face. He shuddered when he saw it, and wiped saliva from its lips.

"The old myths of spirit-possession aren't so far off," Dr. Clitell said. He was the only one wearing his body with any sort of ease. "Some people have always been able to separate their minds from their bodies. Astral projection, and that sort of thing. It wasn't until recently that the personality was localized and an invariant separation-resynthesis procedure adopted."

"Does that mean you're immortal?" Ellis asked.

"Oh, no!" Anderson said, walking over. He grimaced, trying to check his host's unconscious drool. "The personality has a definite life span.

It's somewhat longer than the body's, of course, but still definitely within limits." He succeeded in stopping the flow. "However, it can be stored dormant almost indefinitely."

"And what better place," Haines put in, "for storing a nonmaterial molecule than your own mind? Your nerve connections have been harboring us all along, Ellis. There's plenty of room there. The number of connections in a human brain have been calculated at ten to the—"

"I remember that part," Ellis said. "I'm beginning to understand." He knew why he had been chosen. A psychiatrist would be needed for this job, to gain admittance to the hosts. He had been especially trained. Of course the Krelmans couldn't be told yet about the mission or the M molecule. They wouldn't take kindly to their people—even the defectives—being possessed by Earthmen.

"Look at this," Haines said. Fascinated, he was bending his fingers backwards. He had discovered that his host was double-jointed. The other two men were trying out their bodies in the manner of a man testing a horse. They flexed their arms, bunched their muscles, practiced walking.

"But," Ellis asked, "how will the race . . . I mean, how about women?"

"Get more hosts," Haines told him, still trying out his fingers. "Male and female. You're going to be the greatest doctor on this planet. Every defective will be brought to you for cure. Of

course, we're all in on the secret. No one's going to spill before the right time." He paused and grinned. "Ellis—do you realize what this means? Earth isn't dead! She'll live again."

Ellis nodded. He was having difficulty identifying the large, bland Haines in the film with the shrill-voiced scarecrow in front of him. It would take time for all of them, he knew, and a good deal of readjustment.

"We'd better get to work," Anderson said. "After you have the defectives on this planet serviced, we'll re-

fuel your ship and send you on."

"Where?" Ellis asked. "To another planet?"

"Of course. There are probably only a few million hosts on this one, since we're not touching normals."

"Only! But how many people have I stored?"

There was the sound of voices in the hall.

"You really are a case," Haines said, amused. "Back into bed, men—I think I hear that doctor. How many? The population of Earth was about four billion. You have all of them."

THE END