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SO WISE, SO YOUNG

By GRAHAM DOAR

"You're right, mister, it's a great day! Those 'star-riders' finally landed on the moon! First three tries ended in State funerals, but that shiny new Moonmission IV hit the target on the nose. Which makes it a big day for me personally, because in a way I was on that ship.

"How do I mean? Well, that's a long story, but I don't mind telling it, now. Pull up a chair and order yourself a couple of drinks.

"I guess the place to start would be exactly six months ago. That was the day Jerry was coming home from school. . . ."

THIS was the day Jerry was coming home from school and I was feeling fine. I was on top of the world that day. Not just looking forward to seeing the kid brother again after five years, though that was a part of it all right, but everything was — I don't know — right.

I was up in the tower monitoring the blast-off of flight 807, the Yokohama passenger rocket, last

one for the day. Just past *brennschluss* she began to oscillate a hair, but at zenith I had her on the pip and she went into the long glide as sweet and true as young love. At zenith plus ten minutes exactly, the light above my screen began to wink. This meant that Honolulu had picked her up and she was out of my hands. I cut my screen and lit a cigarette.



Pete Kreuger, my talker, was grinning as he clicked out his panel and settled back. "Honolulu says you're not up to par, Ben. They read her a foot and a half low and a foot south off course." He stuck out a hand and twiddled his fingers and I tossed him the pack of cigarettes.

"How do you like it, boy?" I winked at him. "They don't call me Bull's-eye Ben Bascomb for nothing."

"Is it bull's *eye*, they call you? Guess I heard it wrong." Pete's buzzer sounded and he ducked my back-handed swing and flipped his switch. The Terminal operator's voice squawked in the speaker, "For Ben, Pete. Outside call. Is he clear?"

"Jerry!" I dived for the handset on my desk as Pete threw out the speaker and plugged me in. "Hi, sweetheart. Put him through."

"Hello, Ben?" It was Jerry. His voice was a little deeper, harder, but it was still the kid brother's voice and I'd have known it anywhere.

I cleared my throat. "Hiya, boy."

"Ben!"

"What's new, kid?"

"Aw, Ben. Gee, it's great to hear your voice."

"Yeah. Here, too. How's it been, kid?"

"Clear jets and full tanks, Ben. Cut out that 'kid' stuff. I can lick you, now."

"That'll be the day."

"How's Mom?"

"Tickled pink and nervous as a bride. Been baking goodies ever since she got word that baby was coming home."

"Cut it out or I *will* lick you."

"Haven't you seen her yet? Where are you now?"

"I — I just got in, Ben. I'm downtown. Thought I might come out to the port and pick you up. If you can leave now?"

"Why sure, kid. Any time. I'm all through as soon as I turn in my log."

"Be about twenty minutes. I — I kind of wanted to see you first, Ben."

"What's —? Well, sure, kid. Tech's Room in the main terminal building. You might as well get a look at it now. You'll be spending a lot of your time there."

"Ben, I . . . Yeah. Yeah, Ben. Twenty minutes, huh?"

"Right, Jerry."

Well, there was nothing wrong with his wanting to see me first. Jerry had never really known a father. He'd been only three years old when Dad was killed. He'd always sort of, well, depended on me. I kind of liked it. There was nothing strange about his wanting to see me first.

Nothing strange at all.

I felt fine. I was on top of the world and blasting for altitude.

And when I saw him I wanted

to slug him — to smash him down.

Standing hesitantly in the door of the technical employees' lounge, looking about, he was bigger, darker, a little harder around the eyes and mouth, but still Jerry, still the kid brother. And I felt like beating his stubborn head off.

It was the uniform, trim, space-blue, with the silver comet pinned high on the left breast. Little brother was an Air Force rocket pilot. One of the glamor boys of the military. The "star-riders" they were called, and don't think they didn't love it.

He saw me as I carefully folded and put down the paper I'd been reading and got slowly to my feet. His face set and the gleaming insignia on his snug tunic lifted as he took a deep breath. I threw him a fancy highball and said, "Sorry, Lieutenant. This is the working men's room. The brass hangs out in the other wing."

Color flooded his tanned face, giving it a purple hue. "Ben! Ben, I —"

"I ought to slug you. So help me, I ought to let you have it right here."

"Ben. Listen."

"I've got a good mind to do it. How would your fancypants outfit like it — their brand-new lieutenant getting into a brawl with a mere technician? So help me, I ought to do it."

He put a hand on my shoulder and I slapped it down. "Ben," he

said. "Stop it! Cut it out, Ben!"

"I ought to rip that tin badge off you and make you eat it. If you don't have any consideration for your neck, you might have given a thought to Mom's feelings. By God, I'd like to slug you!"

"Take it easy, Ben."

"Sure. Sure, I'll take it easy. What have I got to get upset about?" The back of my neck felt hot and I knew I was talking too loud and I didn't give a damn. "Work and pinch and beat your brains out to put your kid brother through school. Get down on your knees and crawl to the boss to get him a start with the best line in the world. Brag to all your friends about how he stands at the top of his class. Then when he throws the whole thing over for a fancy-dress uniform, just take it easy. I ought to slug you."

"Ben, I —"

"Go to hell." I went through the door and out across the concourse of the big Terminal, Jerry's mirror-polished boots pounding at my side. "Ben," he said. "Look, Ben, let's go some place where we can talk."

"I've got nothing to talk to you about, glamor boy. Save it for Mom."

"I had to do it, Ben. I had to."

"Nuts to you, hero. Save it."

"Ben." He put his hand on my arm and I stopped and turned to face him. He looked miserable. "Do you think — will Mom take

it too hard? — Will she, Ben?"
I just looked at him.
Maybe he didn't remember, but I did.

Moonmission I, a rickety old bucket that today, wouldn't be passed for transcontinental service, and those starry-eyed fools planned to shoot her to the moon. The *moon*, mind you. And Dad, my Dad, with the starriest eyes of them all, he couldn't miss the chance to ride her. I remembered all right.

I was in the big bedroom upstairs, watching out the window and holding back the tears of frustration. Jerry was just a baby but I was twelve and I wanted to see the blast-off of the first rocket to the moon. Major Bascomb was the pilot and he was my Dad and I had a right to be there. Mom was in the room with me and her face was sort of set and white, her eyes very big. She was scared, I guess, but I wasn't scared. I was proud and angry.

Anyway, from where I was at the window, I knew I could see the fire-trail when the rocketship took off.

And I saw it. A pale streak of blue-white light that was just *there* suddenly, hanging, a fiery finger pointing the way to the stars, beginning to fade already, and then — then — way up, almost out of sight, the sudden burst of a different light, blinding

and white and ferocious and heart-stopping, that winked and went out. And that was the end of *Moonmission I*.

I knew what it was, for sure, but Mom wasn't looking and I couldn't say anything. But then the noise came and she saw my face and she began to scream and went on for a long time screaming until I thought she'd never stop. She did though, after a while, but from then on things were different. It never was the same again.

I slapped his hand away from my arm and said, "How the hell do you think she'd take it?"

The gyrocab taxied around the curve of the cloverleaf, clicked through the switch onto the monorail and began to pick up speed. The tail wheels came up and the voice of the jets went from a basso bellow to a soprano scream. The driver spoke over his shoulder, his gruff tones cutting with ease through the thin note of the turbo-jets. "Have you been in long, Lieutenant?"

"Not long," said Jerry. I snorted and lit a cigarette.

"Rockets, huh?"

"Yeah."

"How d'you like it?"

"It's o.k."

I said, "Look, fellow, would you like me to get up there and monitor the cab? Then you could climb back here and have a real nice chat."

The driver turned his head and gave me a cold stare. "Keep your shirt on, bud. You're getting there, aren't you?"

Jerry said, "All right, driver." He put a hand on my knee.

I said, "How would you like a split lip for a tip?" How would I like to shut my mouth? What the hell, you can't fight them all.

The back of the driver's neck was red. "Any time, bud. Any time," he growled.

Jerry said again, "All right, driver."

"O.k., Loot. O.k."

I said, "If you boys would like to be alone together, you can drop me somewhere." I could see the driver's big hands tighten on the

controls and Jerry said disgustedly, "Cut it out, Ben."

"You can't tell about these cab-drivers. Some of them really go for a uniform."

The cab's speed checked suddenly and I grinned, leaning forward, getting my feet under me. Jerry's grip bit painfully into my knee and he shoved against me, pushing me off balance. "Ben! Stop it! Go ahead, driver. This is a private fight."

"Right, Lieutenant. But if you want to keep it that way, make him lay off." The cab picked up speed again and already we were sweeping down the long approach to the city. I said, "Take your hands off me, hero."



"Listen, Ben, I —"

"What did you do with the money I sent you this last year? Spend it on fancy uniforms?"

He flushed and sat back in the seat. "All right, Ben. It's all in the bank. I'll give you a check. You — you just won't understand, will you? You just don't know."

"The hell I don't know!" I wanted to smash something. I wanted to spit in his eye. "I've seen hundreds of you, glamor boy. I work at the rocketport, remember? Day after day, every blast-off, gangs of kids hanging around the edge of the field with their mouths wide open. Stars in their eyes and rocks in their heads. They can tell you the mass ratio, velocity at *brennschluss* and the name of the pilot on every rocket that takes off — and most of them can't pass arithmetic. Save it, Jerry. I've heard it all."

"All right, Ben. All right."

"Gloryhounds. Every time some wild-eyed peanut-brain writes a new story about spaceships, the Air Force sweeps the kids in like netting fish. 'Adventure! Thrills! Ride the stars with the Star-Riders!' Psui!"

"All right, Ben."

The hell it was all right.

There was the click of the switch under us, the jets cut out and the tail wheels came down. In a silent, smooth glide, the gyrocab rolled to a stop before the hundred-story shack we called home.

The driver said, "Hey, Lieutenant, how about this *Moonmission IV*? You going along?"

Jerry snapped, "How about your minding your own business?" His face was a blank, but color seeped up from the collar of his tunic.

"Jeez, you guys are hard to get along with." The jet thundered and the cab whirled away.

Moonmission IV! I hadn't even given that a thought!

I said, "You poor, wild-eyed, half-witted fish!"

She'd heard the whir of the lift, heard our steps in the corridor and she was standing in the center of the big living room, facing the door. The expression on her face was a thing to see. Mom was only fifty and still a lovely woman. Sure, there were touches of gray through the gold of her hair and some, a little, of the delicate color had faded from her face, but her eyes were bigger and brighter even than I remembered them as a boy and her mouth still smiled easily and often. At this moment she was radiant and her beauty ageless.

I would have cut off my right arm to have saved her this.

"Jerry!" she breathed. "Oh, Jerry!"

He reached her then, lifting her from the floor in a tight embrace, and they were both laughing and crying as he kissed her. I went over and looked out the window.

"Jerry! You — you've grown up!" She was breathless, but her voice sounded all right. "Stand away now. Let me look at you."

I clenched my hands in my pockets.

"Five years. It's been a long time, Jerry. My, you do look like your father. Even the way he — used — to — dress." All right. Now she'd got it. "Oh, no, Jerry!"

I barely heard his voice. "Yes, Mom."

"Ben!" I turned from the window. "Don't let him, Ben!" She had put her hands out toward me and I couldn't move.

"It's done, Mom." Jerry almost whispered. "Don't take it this way, Mom. Don't."

"Ben, you have to get him out of it. I don't care how, you have to get him out of it." All the radiance was gone from her face and, now, her age was evident. And she didn't know the half of it, not yet. "Why didn't you tell me, Ben? I could have stopped him."

Sick, frustrate rage flooded me. "What am I, his nurse? He wants to be a hero, who's stopping him? Why should I give a damn?"

"Ben!"

"Ben didn't know, Mom." Jerry held her, turned her to hold her against his breast, the gleaming silver comet seeming caught in the fine graying gold of her hair. "Oh, Mom, don't take it like that. I — I had to do it. It's what I've al-

ways wanted, Mom. Always."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Her voice was muffled.

"I wish I'd had the nerve. I wish I had."

"Oh, Jerry." She freed her hands and clasped them on his shoulders, looking up at him. "All our plans for you. All Ben's work and sacrifice, the money he's spent on your training, was that all for nothing?"

I turned back to the window, speaking over my shoulder. "Don't give it a thought, Mom. He never did."

Jerry said, "That's not fair, Ben. I've been grateful, I *am* grateful for all you've done. I — I feel awful about — about this. But can't you — both of you — can't you see that a man has to —"

I cut in, hard. "Look, glamor boy. If this is the one about a man has to live his own life, I'm going out and get a drink. I've heard this one."

Mom said, "Ben!" To my back.

"And he knows what he can do with his gratitude!"

I hated him. Right then I hated him.

In the servo-room I pushed the buzzer and spoke into the tube, "Whiskey and soda. One — double." The chime overhead dinged once, signifying that the robot bartender had gone into action.

Giving me this guff about a man has to live his own life. Oh, sure.

And what about her life? What would she have left after the Air Force's newest sky-fish whooshed off to Kingdom Come taking Jerry with it? *Moonmission IV!* When would they be satisfied? Never, probably. Three times they've tried already, three of those shining metal sharks they'd hurled into the bottomless sea of deep space. Three crews, that made, they'd killed. Husbands and fathers — and brothers — blasted to nothingness. For what? So that man could set his foot on the airless, cracked and barren surface of the moon? So that some brass-plated, beribboned pouter pigeon could lean back from his desk, light a fresh cigar and say, "Well, this time we've done it, boys?" Nuts!

The chime dinged twice and I lifted the serving door and took my drink. It tasted fine.

And if it didn't kill her when she found out that the stubborn fool was going along on this next suicide leap, it sure as hell would when the pay-off came. But did he care about that? Oh, no. Why should he give a thought to Mom or to me? A man has to live his own life!

For how long?

I pushed the buzzer again. When the fresh one came, I took it back into the living room.

Over dinner, Jerry talked a lot and Mom listened, bright-eyed

and interested. I could see that she was getting used to the idea. I pretended to eat and kept my mouth shut except to stick a fork in. Sooner or later she'd have to know the rest of it, but be damned if she'd get it from me. Once Mom laughed. Maybe she was forcing it a little, but she laughed. I felt sick.

I left the table and went into the servo-room and came back with another drink.

"Ben," Mom said, "aren't you going to finish your dinner?"

"No," I said.

Nobody said anything for a minute, then Jerry went on with his talk. I sipped my drink.

After a while Mom wheeled the table into the servo-room and came back with the coffee. I should have had some but I didn't.

Jerry lit a cigarette and sipped his coffee, sitting low in his big chair, his head thrown back and his lean legs stretched out. His ankle-high boots gleamed in the light. He said with a luxurious sigh, "Guess in the excitement I never did get around to mentioning that it's swell to be home."

I said, "It's nice to have you, glamor boy. Even for such a short time."

"Aw, lay off it, Ben. That's not funny any more."

"It never was funny."

"Ben!" Mom's voice was pleading. "Be nice. Your brother has only a week's leave. Let's try to

make it a really pleasant one."

"Oh, sure. Anything I can do, hero? I'm yours to command."

Jerry put down his coffee cup and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Ben, what's eating you? Oh, I know you're disappointed that I'm not coming to work with you at the port. But rockets aren't so bad, honest. These new ships — well, you should see them."

"Yes, Ben. Jerry was telling me —"

Three double whiskies and almost no food and then they ganged up on me like that! Rage and hurt and bitter disappointment boiled up in me and I got to my feet, feeling myself begin to tremble. "So Jerry was telling you? I'll bet! Telling you all about the new ships and how they're fitted with so many safety devices there's barely room for the crew. A ten-year-old child can fly them and they land on an egg without cracking the shell. How statistics show that more people are killed in gyrocrafts than in rockets. Well, doesn't it sound familiar to you? Don't you remember hearing it all years ago? And where is *he* now?"

"Take it easy, Ben." Jerry was standing too.

"Ben, don't —"

"Just like his father!" I wasn't drunk, but I sure had lost control of my tongue. "My God, those snake-charmers in the Air Force

could stuff a tin whistle full of carbide and get some damned fool to volunteer to ride it to the moon. Side saddle! For fifty years now they've been killing them off, crew after crew, and still they come in droves."

"Stop it, Ben!"

Mom said, "Jerry, what's he talking about?"

"Nothing, Mom. He's tight."

That did it. "Drunk or sober, hero, you listen to me. You're not going to do it. Do you hear? You're not going to do it! *Moon-mission four* — and five and six and all the rest of them can get along without you. I'll stop you from killing yourself if —"

"Jerry!" Mom's cry was a low wail.

The kid was angry now, as angry as I was. He seized my shoulders and shook, hard. "Shut up, Ben!"

"Take your hands off me, hero!"

"Well, damn you, stop it!"

And I hit him. Not with my fist, but hard, a backhanded swipe full across the mouth. His hands dropped, curled into fists and he stood rigid. For a moment I thought he was going to swing.

And I wished he would. Oh, how I wished he would!

Then his tongue touched gingerly the split in his lip and he said quietly, "O.k., Ben. O.k."

Mom was crying, silently, as I left the room, walking fast.

(Continued on page 161)

SO WISE — SO YOUNG

(Continued from page 107)

It was after midnight and the late moon just now showing over the tall buildings to the east, when the door to my room opened softly and Mom came in.

I heard her but I didn't turn from the window. There was the soft click of the latch as she closed the door, the soft whisper of her slippers feet across the carpet, her hand, gently, on my arm.

"Ben. Go to bed, Ben." Her voice was pleading.

I didn't move. I stood rigid, braced against the strong assault of her love, her concern, drew deeply on the stub of my cigarette and stared at the moon. After a while the sweet pressure grew too great to bear and I said, "All right. I'm sorry, Mom."

"Oh, Ben. Stop fighting. We've all been hurt enough — you and Jerry and I. Stop it now. You can't change it, Ben; it's a thing that's done. Try to live with it. Nothing is too terrible once you accept it. That, I've learned."

I flipped the cigarette out into the night and turned from the window. "The fool!" I said. "The stubborn fool!"

"No, Ben." She sat on the edge of my bed and spoke calmly. "Jerry's no fool. He's very young, that's true. But he's very wise."

"Wise!"

"Yes, Ben, wise. Jerry has his dream, Ben, a very youthful dream, but true for him — and rather wonderful. And he's wise enough to know that the man who denies his dream, in some way dies a little. It's a wisdom of the very young, Ben, and comes from the heart, not the head. But it's no less true."

"So wise so young," I murmured.

"What, Ben?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Mom. Just a quotation from an old, old play." *So wise so young, they say, do never live long.* No! I sat on the floor, me with my thirty-one years, and put my head in her lap. Long-remembered fragrance enveloped me and her comforting warmth and suddenly I was very tired.

"Mom," I said. "Does he think he's the only one who ever dreamed? What can a man do when his dream is out of reach? How does he follow his shining dream when the path is blocked?"

"I know, Ben." Her hand stroked across my hair. "Did you think I didn't know? Did you think I never saw your face when the rocketships went over? Did you think I couldn't read the hunger in your eyes when you looked at Jerry in his uniform?"

"Mom. No, Mom, I never —"

"Of course you did, Ben. You couldn't help resenting us sometimes. Times when you knew that we, Jerry and I, were what stood between you and your dream. But you swallowed your resentment

and went on giving. Don't be ashamed of it, Ben. Be proud!"

"I—" My throat closed up.

"Listen, Ben." Her hands closed gently on my face and turned it up to hers. In the dim light her face was pale, her eyes darkly glistening, but she was smiling. "Remember this. Whatever Jerry may make of his dream, whatever of honor or glory comes to him, it is of your giving. In the frustration of your dream was the flowering of his. Take your fair share of it, Ben, and be proud. He's a wonderful boy you've made." Her hands trembled suddenly against my cheeks and her voice broke.

"But — but he's so young!"

I held her in my arms for a long time while she cried silently, and I knew it was for my dream as much as for Jerry. My face was turned to the window, and the far-off pale orb of the moon glinted strangely through the tears in my own eyes. "All right, kid," I whispered. "We'll try it again. We can't be wrong forever."

The door opened and Jerry stood there, looking very young in his pajamas. "Ben," he said, "I couldn't sleep."

"Come on in, boy," I said. "Join the party."

I felt fine again.
