

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING
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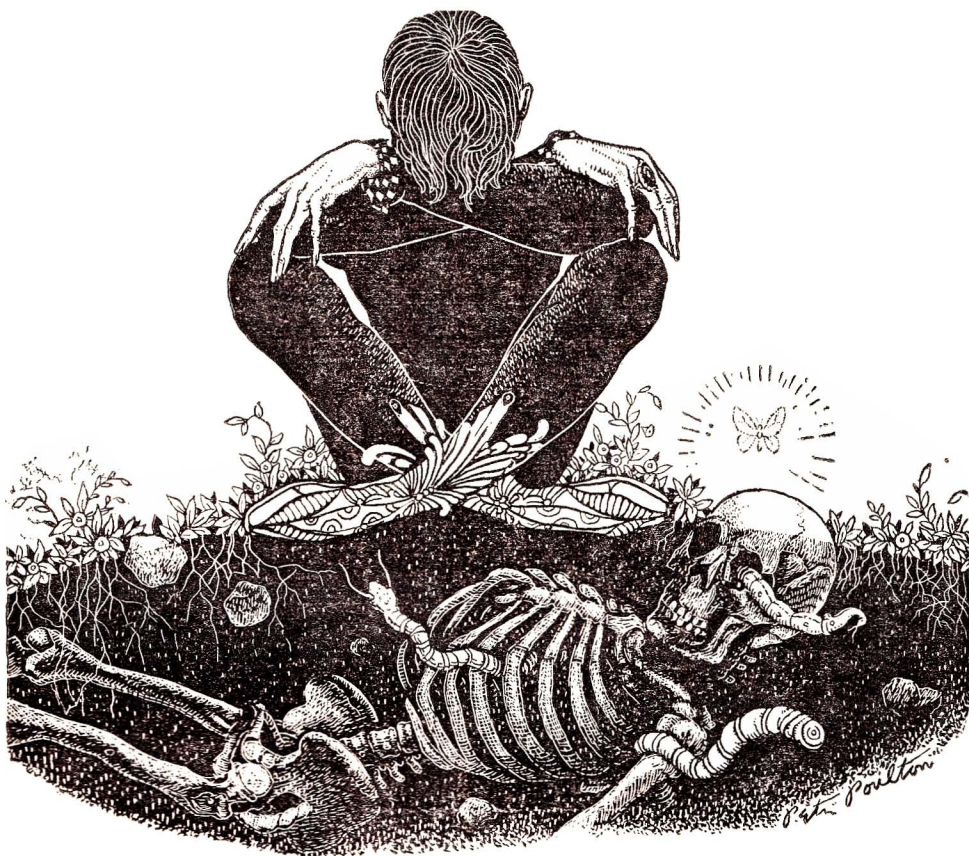
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ED ROFHEART, *Art Director*; SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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When you're born, you come in crying, and when you leave,
we cry for you, so it's really—

Too Bad You Died

By JOSEPH SLOTKIN

HIYA, sucker!
Just a second, I want to take another bite out of this Venusian pear-orange . . . mmmm! Good!

Ha, they're juicy this time of year. I'll *never* be able to get enough of 'em, if I live to be a million. And I will.

Still there? Well, you haven't got anywhere else to go, have you? But I have. And, brother, I'm *going* there. Got lots of time, too. And when I get

tired of where I've been, I'll go where I haven't been. It's a bi-i-g universe. Expanding, too. Ahhhh! It's good to be alive.

Hmmm? Oh, you just missed. Uh-huh, that's right. Just born a little too late, is all. Tough. Too bad. Too bad you had to go and die.

Oh, well, you would have been pretty old anyhow by the time we discovered how to live on and on and on . . . pretty

old and decrepit, I'd say. What? About a hundred? Well, we *could* have made you twenty again. But you died. Well, serves you right.

What? Sure, it serves you right. Stupid. That's what you were. You and all the others. If a man's sucker enough to be satisfied with living eighty—ninety years and then dying, well then he gets what he deserves when he dies.

Dies, and moulders and decays, and doesn't taste or feel, or hear or smell anymore. Forever.

What was it some ancient poet once said about death? "Sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything. . . ."

Sure, I'm rubbing it in. So what? Your own fault, I tell you. You *could* have lived forever. But what did you do? You wasted your time.

You worked in the fields, and made plastic fire engines, and added up rows of figures in a bank or robbed a bank, and operated a drill press or drilled teeth, and carried the mail or mailed it, and drove a taxicab, and when there was a war to be fought you went to war, and then came back, depending on how lucky you thought you were, and went right on waiting on tables or getting under them, and writing poetry, and designing dresses, and welding automobile bodies guaranteed for ninety days or 4,000 miles, and joining fraternities. . . .

But you did it by yourself, and for yourself, but not *of* yourself. You did it in a vacuum, and you know how old Mother N feels about *that*.

Ever watch a bunch of sheep in a pen? That was you. Ever think of how quick they could all get out if they ever got together and rammed down that gate? Do they ever do it?

Judas, no! Lamb chops!

Funny kind of civilization you had, where sheep made pens that were guaranteed to last a lifetime. Maybe you were afraid if you lived too long the pens would wear out.

Of course, if you outwore the pens, you'd be wordless, and then you'd have to think, wouldn't you? Maybe even

come up with telepathy. We've got that now, too.

OH, IF I wanted to, I could study for one of your lifetimes, and come up with some pretty fancy poetry about sheep, and pens and all that. I guess I will, one of these centuries. I've studied medicine, and physics, engineering and chemistry so far—yes, and space navigation and rocket design, too. Took me five hundred years. But so what? It was fun. I had plenty of time, and I slept good, and ate good.

Oh, the food! You don't get tired of food when you're healthy, you know. The things I've tasted! Fresh, cool tangy berries from the hills of Mars, and little roasted birds snared in the forests of Venus, and breads made out of grains grown on the moons of Jupiter! Luscious steaks of the star-calves, thousand-pound natives of Neptune, and the dainty, light little cakes concocted on Mercury.

Wines, aged on Sirius, and champagne, seasoned on Far Centaurus. Sparkling ales, brewed a billion miles from the sun, and flavored with the crystal waters that ooze from the rocks on Pluto.

And women! Man! I've got thousands of descendants, each one a beautiful memory. Ever think about it—a lifetime's not really nearly long enough to figure out how to *begin* to make love?

Sucker, that's you.

Well, you missed out, that's all. You rationalized it beautifully, though. . . . ranted about the "Hedonic tone," and "life everlasting," and "compensation."

But you died.

That's why I say it serves you right. You could have found out how to live forever by 1960, but you were too suspicious of each other, and too busy making complexion cream and dime store jewelry, and hair lotion and a lot of other junk.

Go ahead, brush your teeth, put a dime-store jewel, or even the Hope Emeralds, one in each eye socket, pour

some hair lotion on your skull, and then look at me, eating this broiled Venus apple. Sucker!

Hmmm? Oh, it was a fellow name of Hawkins finally turned the trick. Common name. Just got tired of seeing people die. Figured with a democracy, maybe he could get a pressure group together and vote death out of existence.

Sure, he did it. Got petitions, and interested backers, and went to Washington, What backers? Oh, just people who didn't want to die. Who ever *wanted* to die? Did you?

When you were living, did you ever stop to think of the billions of dollars, and trillions of man-hours, and quadrillions of skillions of atoms that were being wasted on things that couldn't possibly add up to living forever?

Ever stop to think of that while you were attending a funeral? Of your mother, say, or—father, or sweetheart, wife, son, daughter?

If every plastic hair comb, chrome radiator grille, martini, anti-aircraft gun, and flower pot were piled beside your future coffin, would you trade?

Maybe you would. Because I guess you did. And don't tell me you weren't ready. Wanting to means being ready.

Why am I rubbing it in? Oh, I don't

know. I don't *mean* to be cruel. I've still got human emotions, you know. Maybe I'm covering up. It just seems the stupidest kind of blindness—when if you and everybody else had just taken time out from selling fur coats and refrigerators and washing machines, from grabbing a couple of bucks to get by with, or to lay aside for a couple more years of poor eyesight and plastic dentures and fading perceptions in retirement, and all got together, putting first things first sooner, maybe you'd still be here today, on this Earth.

Maybe if you'd just taken more interest in that big bio-chemical project Hawkins finally swung, well, I wouldn't have to be reaching out this way, from my universe to your universe.

After all, I don't *like* standing here by your grave every year and laying down a memorial wreath you can't smell, saying a prayer you can't hear, crying tears you can't see.

God didn't make them any better than you, and no matter what universes I roam through in all eternity, the feelings we had for each other will never be duplicated. And, after all, you *were* my father.

So long, Mr. Hawkins, Senior. Too bad you died.