

# STARTLING *stories*

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Illustration  
by ORBAN



# WAYFARER

By **ROGER DEE**

*"They call me an idiot and I guess I am. But the voices are real. . . ."*

**T**HE moon is shining in through my upstairs window.

It makes a moon-tree on the walls because the big oak outside sifts the light through in patterns of leaves and branches and the patterns move up and down when the oak sways in the wind.

It is early warm summertime and nearly midnight and it is wonderful to lie in bed feeling drowsy and watching the moon-tree slide up and down the wall-paper but I can't go back to sleep because Robbie is calling me. I have to go up the mountain and try again to get

Robbie and the Wayfaring Master who sleeps in the star ship with him out of the water at the bottom of the old bluestone quarry so they can go home.

It is a lot of trouble but I don't mind. Nobody ever took time before to bother with a halfwit like my father says I am, and it is nice now to be needed. Robbie is my friend and I am glad to help him if I can.

A FEW minutes ago I was dreaming about a warm little misty blue world named Khairann that Robbie and the Wayfarers explored once, but old Jeff was barking so loud out in the kennels behind the tobacco barns that he woke me up.

Now that I am awake I can hear Robbie's voice too, calling me from the star ship under the water at the bottom of the quarry. It is just a tiny whisper inside my head but it is clearer than old Jeff's barking and it says, "Wake up, Jamie! You promised to learn the pattern tonight and let us go home again, remember? Hurry, Jamie!"

And now I hear the hounds baying up on the mountain where my father and my brother Ralph are out with flashlights and guns, helping the other men search the woods for Mr. Murtaugh's body. I think at first that Jeff is barking because he wants to be up there too but can't go because he has been acting strange lately and my father thinks he is sick. Then I remember what makes Jeff act so strange and I know he is trying to wake me up on purpose so I'll take him with me up to the old bluestone quarry where the star ship is. Jeff has been acting like this since that night last week when my father and my brother Ralph and our neighbor Mr. Murtaugh were hunting foxes in the woods and the dogs caught one of the Wayfarers by surprise while he was exploring and tore him to little pieces.

That was a terrible thing. I was sick all next day after I saw the funny little foot my father brought home. It had toes all around instead of just in front and it was all sticky with blood that was

blue and not red. It was all that was left and my father couldn't imagine what sort of animal it had belonged to and that made him uneasy. The neighbors were uneasy about it too and said there might be more things like it loose in the woods, and when Mr. Murtaugh disappeared last night they thought one of them must have got him and they started looking for his body.

They're wrong about Mr. Murtaugh. I know where his body is but I can't tell anybody because if I did they'd find the star ship and then they wouldn't let Robbie go home again.

They're wrong about old Jeff's being sick, too. Robbie told me on the first night I heard him calling for help from the old bluestone quarry that the reason old Jeff was acting so funny was because the Wayfarer the dogs had killed wasn't really dead.

The Wayfarers built Robbie when they made their star ship, so he knows all about them. They're not like us. They don't have any home and they live forever and travel from star to star just for the fun of seeing what is there and that's why they call themselves Wayfarers. They don't have any bodies of their own, either, Robbie says. They live inside other creatures that aren't as smart as they are but who are glad to share their bodies for life with Robbie's Masters so they can be Wayfarers too.

That's what makes old Jeff act so strange, because when the dogs caught the Wayfarer by surprise in the woods he didn't have time to think the pattern that would set Robbie free to act for himself and to wake up the other Master who was asleep in the big tank they rest in between stars. He had just time enough to get out of his own body and into old Jeff's where he could wait for help. He's out there now making Jeff bark loud to wake me up. I wish he could talk to me the way Robbie does but he can't because Jeff's brain isn't made right. He could talk if he were inside *me* because I'm smarter than old Jeff even if I am a halfwit like my father says.

Robbie is calling me now. "Hurry, Jamie," he says. "The men on the mountain will find what they're looking for if they come here and drag the water, but they'll find the star ship too. Hurry, Jamie!"

**I** LIKE Robbie's voice.

It is like the moon-tree that slides up and down my wallpaper because it is quiet and smooth and pretty like music that moves. I like it better than my father's voice or Mr. Murtaugh's or Phyllis Murtaugh's who used to be Phyllis Bascombe when we were little together. But I like my brother Ralph's voice better.

I wish I were like Ralph.

Ralph is younger than me. I used to follow him around everywhere when he was little but when he got bigger he wouldn't let me any more. I said out loud once that God must have been like Ralph when He was young but it must have been a bad thing to say because Ralph said I was a goddamn idiot and hit me.

Ralph is twenty-four and has been to college and he knows nearly everything. Not as much as Robbie knows of course but Robbie isn't human like us. Robbie isn't really alive the way we are but he's been everywhere and seen everything.

But now Robbie is sunk in the star ship under the water down at the bottom of the old bluestone quarry and one of his Masters is asleep in the big between-stars tank and the other one can't think the pattern that will let Robbie act for himself, and Robbie is calling me to come and help.

"You *must* learn the pattern tonight," Robbie is saying. "Hurry, Jamie!"

So I get out of bed and put on my clothes and go downstairs like I have done every night since last week. But tonight the house is empty so I don't have to sneak out because my father and my brother Ralph are out with the search parties on the mountain looking for Mr. Murtaugh's body.

Everybody is wrong about what hap-

pened to Mr. Murtaugh, but that's because they can't hear Robbie calling for help. Grown-up people can't hear him, only children and me. And grown-ups never listen to what children and half-wits say.

I wish I had been there that night when the dogs caught the Wayfaring Master in the woods. I'd have made them let him go and none of this would have happened. But I wasn't there so now I have to go up the mountain and try again to learn the pattern that will set Robbie and the other Master free. Robbie is calling me.

So I say, "I'm coming, Robbie," inside my head the way Robbie and I talk to each other, and I run from the house past the tobacco barns and the stables and the kennels toward the quarry on the mountain.

**T**HE horses nicker when I run past their stables in the moonlight because they know my smell and they like me. I run past the kennels and old Jeff stands up against the fence and digs at the wire because he wants to go along. All the animals like me because I understand them and like them. I wish I understood people as well because then people would like me too, but people are different. They laugh or turn their faces away. Phyllis used to like me when we were both little and her name was Bascombe, but since we grew up and she married Mr. Murtaugh she turns her face away and it hurts.

Phyllis likes my brother Ralph better. I used to see them walking in the woods often when Mr. Murtaugh was away from home.

Old Jeff whines at me through the fence and I stop to pat him on the head before I remember about one of Robbie's Masters being inside him. He looks at me with his ears and tail hanging limp and funny like he isn't used to them and he looks at me with eyes that are round and steady like a man's.

"Do you want to go too, Jeff boy?" I ask and Jeff jumps so hard against the

fence that he tears his nose and it bleeds a little. So I let him out of the wire run and he limps along beside me up the trail toward the graveled county road that leads to the old quarry.

It is nice here in the woods at night with the moon shining on the white dogwood trees and the wild lilac smelling sweet on the air. All the birds are asleep but the owls and a few whippoorwills, and now and then I see a coon's eyes shining at me from the shadows. I would like to stay all night in the woods listening and watching and smelling but I can't. Robbie is calling me.

I see flashlights bobbing through the trees away down the mountainside. I hear hounds barking in the night where my father and my brother Ralph are helping look for Mr. Murtaugh's body, but I don't see any lights up near the old quarry.

I hope they won't look up there because if they poke around in the deep water they'll find Mr. Murtaugh down there on the bottom with a big rock tied to his feet. And if they find Mr. Murtaugh they'll find the star ship too, and that would be terrible.

I think old Jeff and the Wayfarer inside him both feel the same way. They don't bark at the other dogs or try to go to them, they just limp along with me as fast as old Jeff can go.

We reach the quarry together.

**T**HE old quarry used to be a busy place when people blasted bluestone rock out of it for the county roads, but it is deserted now because it got too deep and water filled it up full. The water is deeper than a high house and would drown me if I fell into it.

I sit on the edge of the quarry with my legs hanging over and my bare feet touching the water. Jeff lies down beside me and we both pant for breath after our long fast climb.

The moon is shining on the smooth dark water and it is very quiet here because the quarry is too deep and cold for frogs. I can't see the star ship but

I know what it looks because Robbie told me. I know about the millions of little wires that run through it and about the shiny little tank up near the front that is the part Robbie thinks with. The cables and coils and tubes and other things are like hands and feet and eyes and ears to him, but the shiny tank is Robbie's head.

It is wonderful inside the ship but there is nobody in it but the other Wayfarer who is sleeping in his big tank. He has been asleep for years and years, Robbie says, while Robbie searched for a sun with planets. He won't ever wake up now unless I can remember the pattern well enough to think it all at once and set Robbie free to take charge of the ship again.

I hope I can remember the pattern tonight but I know I'll miss Robbie terribly if I do and he goes away. I feel lonesome already when I think of that but I'll try.

"Here I am, Robbie," I say inside my head.

"I know," Robbie answers. "Try hard to remember tonight, Jamie. It may be our last chance."

I try, but the pattern is terribly hard to remember.

The moon moves across the sky while I am trying and slides down behind the mountains and the other moon on the water touches the quarry wall and goes out. It is very dark now and so quiet I can hear old Jeff breathing in and out beside me.

"I can't remember it, Robbie," I say.

I want to cry because it is my fault that I can't hold the pattern in my head long enough to think it all at once and that hurts. I could learn it easy if I were smart like my brother Ralph instead of being a halfwit like my father says I am.

Robbie is very patient.

"It isn't your fault," Robbie says. "And you shouldn't feel sorry for yourself, Jamie, because you're more fortunate really than those others you envy. Your people are the strangest we have

found in thousands of years of wayfaring; to become adult they must sacrifice their young trust and imagination, and prison their stunted spirits in shells of suspicion too strong to break."

I don't understand what Robbie means. I'm a halfwit and everybody knows it. I can't read or do arithmetic. I can't even talk if somebody is angry with me because my tongue gets thick.

"But you can *feel*, Jamie," Robbie is saying. "You can imagine yourself in the place of a dog or a horse or any tiniest bug, and you can understand how that other creature feels and sympathize with it. That's called empathy, Jamie, and it places you closer to the real meaning and beauty that the Wayfarers find in life than your grown-ups can ever hope to be. Think—you wouldn't take your brother Ralph's gun and go hunting, would you?"

I know what he means now and it makes me feel good to know that there are others somewhere who feel the same way I do about that. I couldn't hunt things to hurt them. I know how it feels to be a fox running for its life through the mountains with no breath left in its lungs and its coat torn with briars and burrs and the hounds baying loud and fierce at its heels, and I can't understand any better than the fox can why this has to be when all it wants is to live. I know how it feels to fly up high like the springtime geese with the clean blue air all around and the woods and fields spread out below like a land in a fairy story, and how hard it is to understand why somebody would lie for hours in the cold dark of morning just to shoot me when I flew down to the water to tell the other geese what I had seen.

I am trying now to imagine how wonderful it must be to go from world to world like the Wayfarers do and find every creature understanding and accepting each other instead of hating and turning their faces away from each other the way people here do. And I *can* imagine it. I can't remember the pattern, but I can understand how good it

must be to be a Wayfarer.

"The Masters might take you with us if we can escape this prison world," Robbie is saying. "Would you like that, Jamie?"

I THINK at first I would like to go because it would be nice to be understood everywhere I went. I know I wouldn't go, though, because if I did I'd never see Ralph again and I couldn't stand that. I'd miss old Jeff and the horses and the wild shy things that peep out at me in the woods, but I'd miss Ralph worst of all.

But I couldn't go away even if I wanted to because I can't remember the pattern long enough to let Robbie loose. I know that now. One of Robbie's Masters is asleep in his between-stars tank and the other is caught in old Jeff's body and can't think the pattern that would set Robbie free because Jeff's mind isn't made right for that kind of thinking. Nobody but a man could think a pattern like that.

I have to stop thinking now about that. Somebody is coming.

A car has stopped at the entrance to the quarry and somebody is getting out. Somebody else is coming out of the shadows and they blink their flashlights at each other and I see who it is.

One is Phyllis Murtaugh who used to be Phyllis Bascombe when we were little together. The other one is my brother Ralph and he has a gun under his arm. They walk down toward the water where I am sitting with old Jeff and I can hear them talking.

"You shouldn't have come, darling," Ralph is saying. "Suppose someone sees us here together—you know what *that* would mean!"

Phyllis sounds scared. "I couldn't help it, Ralph. I'd have gone mad in that house all alone, remembering . . . I had to see you."

They stop a few feet from me and stand close together for a minute. I move a little to see what they are doing and a loose rock rolls under my feet and

goes splash in the water.

Their lights blind me. Everything is all confused.

Now I can see again because they have turned off their flashlights and are standing in front of me. Ralph is very angry and I want to tell him I am sorry but I can't. My tongue feels big and thick the way it always feels when someone is angry with me.

"What are you doing here, you god-damned halfwit?" Ralph says.

Phyllis is more scared than ever. Her eyes are big and round and afraid.

Ralph comes closer. "Are you spying on us, Jamie?" he says. "Were you up here last night when—"

Phyllis pulls hard at his arm. They whisper together. "I will if I must," I hear Ralph say. "We can't let him go if he knows about Murtaugh."

I know what he means now. Mr. Murtaugh is down there at the bottom of the quarry with a big rock tied to his feet and he is dead and Ralph is angry with me because I know about it. Robbie told me last night what had happened but I didn't know until now that it was Ralph who put Mr. Murtaugh in the water. I try to tell Ralph I didn't want to know that but I can't. My tongue won't work. Robbie is talking to me now and his voice sounds worried.

"Don't tell him that, Jamie," Robbie is saying. "Maybe he'll let you go if he thinks you don't know. Tell him about me and about the star ship, and he'll understand why you're here."

Robbie is saying that because he doesn't want Ralph to be angry with me. Robbie is helping me now to tell Ralph about the star ship. He puts the words into my head and I say them because my tongue isn't thick any more when Robbie thinks of me.

"I came to help Robbie get his star ship out of the water so he can go home," I tell Ralph. "Robbie calls me for help every night but nobody can hear him but me and some children. But I can't get him out because I can't remember the pattern that turns him on again."

Ralph and Phyllis are looking at each other.

"Star ship!" Phyllis says. She holds Ralph's arm tight. "Ralph, something *has* waked the Simmonds children every night for a week. Mrs. Simmonds told me . . ."

"Ralph doesn't answer. He kneels down and puts his flashlight under the water and turns it on. The light shines down and down through the clear green water to the bottom.

"He's right, by God!" Ralph says. "Phyllis, there *is* a ship down there!"

**I**T IS easy to talk now that Ralph believes me.

It is easy to tell Ralph how Robbie called me that first night and how I went up to the quarry to help him but couldn't. I say how nice it is to find somebody who understands me the way I understand old Jeff and the horses. I tell Ralph how friendly and gentle the Wayfarers are and how they like to travel between the worlds just to see what is new and interesting on them.

Ralph and Phyllis look at each other again when I tell about the Wayfarer who was killed by my father's foxhounds and I think they are afraid of what Robbie and his other Master may do so I explain that Robbie can't do anything down there at the bottom of the quarry because the Wayfarer who went out to explore left Robbie shut off so he couldn't move the ship or wake the other Master. I tell Ralph everything except about the dead Wayfarer being inside old Jeff right beside me now, and I would tell him that but Robbie says no. I explain why I call him Robbie, because I can't remember the word he gave me but it sounded like Robert so I call him Robbie because Robbie and Jamie sound good together.

"Robot — Robert — Robbie!" Ralph says. He is looking at Phyllis again and he is not afraid any more. "Phyllis, one of them came out to explore and was killed by the dogs. A robot is in charge of that ship down there, and it's switch-

ed off and helpless until somebody gives it permission to work again. Do you realize what a find this is?"

It is not cold but Phyllis is shivering. "I don't like it, Ralph! Please, let's go and leave it there. I'm afraid—"

Ralph is shaking her. "You don't understand—that ship will be worth millions when we're ready to raise it, and it's ours. It's the same as treasure-trove, don't you see?"

Phyllis is crying. "No, no, no . . ."

Ralph shakes her again. "You little fool, all we've got to do is to wait until the search dies down and—"

He turns Phyllis loose and looks at me.

"If you're afraid Jamie will talk and somebody will check his story and find Murtaugh," Ralph says, "you can forget it. Jamie won't tell."

Phyllis has stopped crying and her eyes are round. "You'd do it, Ralph? To your own brother?"

"I would," Ralph says. "All my life he's been a handicap and an embarrassment to me, the slobbering fool, a weight around my neck. And I can't let him go now—he'd go telling what is down there, and that would be the end of us."

I don't understand what Ralph means because I can't think as fast as Ralph talks. But Robbie knows. "I'm sorry, Jamie," Robbie is saying. "I was wrong after all. Your brother Ralph is going to put you down under the water the way he did Mr. Murtaugh."

**I** UNDERSTAND now what Ralph means but I can't believe it.

Mr. Murtaugh is dead and if Ralph puts me down there with him I'll be dead too. I won't see old Jeff any more or hear the dogs barking in their kennels or the horses nickering when I pass by their stables. I won't hear the crows cawing any more over the cornfields in the rain or see the little coons blinking their clean shiny eyes at me in the woods at night. But worst of all I won't see Ralph any more and I can't stand that.

It is like dying.

Ralph doesn't want me to live any

more. Nobody ever wanted me to live since my mother died a long long time ago, not my father nor Phyllis or anybody. I think now that maybe it will be nicer after all down there with Mr. Murtaugh because it is quiet and calm there and nobody can hurt you.

"You'd better hurry, then," Phyllis is saying. "Someone may come up this way . . ."

Ralph points his gun at me.

Old Jeff stands up and rubs against my knee and I reach down to pat him before I remember about the Wayfarer being caught inside him.

I hear Robbie's voice inside my head. "I'm sorry, Jamie."

"Goodbye, Robbie," I say. "Goodbye, Jeff." I don't say goodbye to Ralph and Phyllis because they don't want me.

I know now that the Wayfarer inside old Jeff will never get home again. He can't go as long as Jeff lives because Jeff is only a dog and can't think a thought like the pattern Robbie has tried to teach me. I could think it, if I had a Master to help . . .

I wish I had thought of that before. But it is too late now because Ralph is pointing his gun at me.

"Not too late if you really want to do it, Jamie," Robbie is saying inside my head. "But hurry, *hurry!*"

I do want to do it. Old Jeff is standing at my knee watching Ralph. Jeff knows what a gun is and what it will do and so of course the Master inside him knows too.

"Get him, Jeff!" I say.

Jeff is growling and jumping at Ralph. Ralph is pointing the gun at him now instead of at me and it bangs loud. Old Jeff falls and lies still but his eyes are open and I can see the Wayfarer inside him looking out at me from the body he is losing. "It's all right," I say. "You can have mine."

A strange thing is happening and it makes me dizzy but it is wonderful too. The Wayfarer is inside me and it is like sunshine flooding in through a clean window and filling every crack and cor-



ner of an empty room. He couldn't get in before, as long as Jeff was alive. He was trapped inside Jeff, and Robbie couldn't ask me to kill Jeff to let the Wayfarer out. I am not afraid any more because the Wayfarer and I are one now and together we can do anything.

The pattern is in my head as strong and plain as a shout, and it is what Robbie has been waiting for. I don't know what Robbie is doing in the star ship, but all at once I can't move and neither can Ralph or Phyllis.

The deep water in the quarry boils and roars and the star ship leaps up from the bottom and hangs in the air so close I can see the little round door opening in its side. There is a soft light inside the ship and I can see the other Master, the one that was asleep in the big between-stars tank. He is awake now and he is helping Robbie.

Something I can't see reaches out from the ship and lifts me up. Now I am standing inside the round doorway of the ship, looking down at Ralph and Phyllis. They can't move but the men coming up the old quarry road toward us can. The men start to run when they see the lighted star ship hanging against the night sky but I know they can't stop us. Nobody can stop us now.

**I** KNOW this because the Wayfarer inside me knows it. He doesn't have to speak inside my head the way Robbie does. I know what he thinks because we're one person now and we think together. And because we are together I can understand all the things that used to puzzle me.

The sky is getting pink in the east now and that means the sun is rising. I am looking down at Ralph in the early morning light and remembering how I used to worship him. I remember what I said once, that God must have been like Ralph when He was young, and I wonder how I could have thought so.

Ralph looks smaller now and not wonderful at all. He looks like a spoiled vicious little boy who breaks things

when he doesn't get what he wants, and I am sorry for him. He and Phyllis can move now, but the men coming up the road will get them because Mr. Murtaugh's body broke loose from the rock and is floating on the surface of the water. I am sorry for all of them down there because they will never see what I am going to see out there with Robbie and the other Wayfarer.

I know what is ahead of me now and it is as wonderful as Robbie said it would be. All the stars in the sky are waiting for us and all the creatures living on the little worlds that swing around them are waiting too, and they are all friendly because there isn't another place anywhere as harsh and cruel as Earth. I am a Wayfarer myself now, and I know.

The other Wayfarer is standing beside me any his thoughts are linked with mine. "Welcome home," he is thinking, because the ship is home to us.

Robbie is all around us like a warm live shell, snug and protective and comforting. The star ship quivers eagerly like a horse waiting for the word to run. We have just a little moment left before the round door closes and we shoot up into the sky.

I use that moment to look out over the green mountains shining in the early sunlight and to remember the dogs and horses and the birds and flowers and the shy little wild things that used to peep out at me from the shadows in the woods at night. The Wayfarer inside me likes the things I remember, because we think together: "They are good things. We'll come back and see them again some day, when the people are all gone."

The round door is swinging shut, hiding the people who stand on the ground with their mouths open. They are all alike now and not interesting or puzzling any more, so my last look is not at them but at the mountains standing green and quiet and cool with dew against the morning.

"Goodbye, little world." I say.